

Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization

Classical Arabic Biography

The Heirs of the Prophets in the
Age of al-Ma'mūn

Michael Cooperson



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The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mūn

Pre-modern Arabic biography has served as a major source for the history of Islamic civilization. In the first book-length study in English to explore the origins and development of classical Arabic biography, Michael Cooperson demonstrates how Muslim scholars used the notions of heirship and transmission to document the activities of political, scholarly, and religious communities. The author also explains how medieval Arab writers used biography to tell the life-stories of important historical figures by examining the careers of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn, the Shiite Imam 'Alī al-Riḍā, the Sunni scholar Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, and the ascetic Bishr al-Ḥāfi. Each of these figures represented a tradition of political and spiritual heirship to the Prophet Muḥammad and each, moreover, knew at least one of the others, regarding him as a rival or an ally. The study reconstructs the career of each figure from his own biographies, as well as from the biographies of the others. Drawing on anthropology and comparative religion, as well as history and literary criticism, the book offers an account of how each figure responded to the presence of the others and how these responses were preserved or rewritten by posterity.

MICHAEL COOPERSON is Assistant Professor of Arabic in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles.

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The heirs of the prophets in the age of al-Ma'mūn

MICHAEL COOPERSON

University of California, Los Angeles



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Dedicated to my parents,
and to the memory of my grandparents

The reader familiar with tales of people now dead, with the feats of those plunged into the cavern of extinction never to emerge, with the lore of those who scaled the heights of power, and with the virtues of those whom Providence delivered from the stranglehold of adversity, feels that he has known such men in their own time. He seems to join them on their pillowed thrones and lean companionably with them on their cushioned couches. He gazes at their faces – some framed in hoods, others lambent under helmets – seeing in the evil ones the demonic spark, and in the good ones that virtue which places them in the company of angels. He seems to share with them the best pressings of aged wine in an age where time no longer presses, and to behold them as in their battles they breathe the sweet scent of swordplay in the shadows of tall and blood-stained lances. It is as if all that company were of his own age and time; as if those who grieve him were his enemies, and those who give him pleasure, his friends. But they have ridden in the vanguard long before him, while he walks in the rear-guard far behind.

al-Ṣafadī, *Wāfī*, I: 4

Men by mere principles of nature are capable of being affected with things that have a special relation to religion as well as other things. A person by mere nature, for instance, may be liable to be affected with the story of Jesus Christ, and the sufferings he underwent, as well as by any other tragical story: he may be the more affected with it from the interest he conceives mankind to have in it; yea, he may be affected with it without believing in it; as well as a man may be affected with what he reads in a romance, or sees acted in a stage play. He may be affected with a lively and eloquent description of many pleasant things that attend the state of the blessed in heaven, as well as his imagination be entertained by a romantic description of the pleasantness of fairy land, or the like . . . A person therefore may have affecting views of the things of religion, and yet be very destitute of spiritual light. Flesh and blood may be the author of this: one man may give another an affecting view of divine things with but common assistance: but God alone can give a spiritual discovery of them.

Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” *Selected Writings* (1734), 71

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xvi
<i>Note on transliteration</i>	xvii
<i>Note on dating systems</i>	xviii
<i>Glossary</i>	xix
1 The development of the genre	1
2 The caliph al-Ma'mūn	24
3 The Imam 'Alī al-Riḍā	70
4 The Ḥadīth-scholar Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal	107
5 The renunciant Bishr al-Ḥāfī	154
Conclusions	188
<i>Appendix The circumstances of 'Alī al-Riḍā's death</i>	193
<i>Bibliography</i>	197
<i>Index</i>	211

Preface

If poetry is the “archive of the Arabs,” biography is the archive of the Muslims. Premodern Arabic literature contains biographies of hundreds of thousands of Muslims (and occasionally non-Muslims) from soldiers and scholars to lovers and lunatics. With this diversity of subjects comes a variety of forms, ranging from simple lists of names to elaborately detailed narratives. In a few cases, above all that of the Prophet Muḥammad, biographers strove for exhaustive coverage of a subject’s life from birth to death. More commonly, they collected the names of all the notable men, and sometimes the notable women, who had lived in a certain town, practiced a single profession, or died in a particular century.¹ The entries in such collections are often very short. However, the collections themselves are so large that historians have been able to mine them for information about kinship, marriage, political alliances, labor, social status, and the transmission of knowledge in premodern Muslim communities.² Scholars of Arabic literature, for their part, have preferred to deal with single entries that contain descriptions, anecdotes, and lines of poetry. They have analyzed compilers’ use of sources, traced changes in the representation of a single subject over time, and brought to light biographers’ notions of plotting, characterization, and moral thematics.³

Given the genre’s diversity of form, one may wonder whether the term biography properly applies to it at all. Admittedly, it is awkward to refer to a list of names as a work of biography. Yet it is equally awkward to impose a firm distinction between the bare list and an annotated one, or between the annotated list and one where the notes have grown into anecdotes. Moreover, the tradition itself regarded all such works as related. In their discussions of

¹ Surveys of the genre include Hafsi, “Recherches” (cf. Robinson, “Al-Mu‘āfā”); Gibb, “Islamic Biographical Literature”; von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam*, 276–81; Khalidi, “Islamic Biographical Dictionaries”; Auchterlonie, *Arabic Biographical Dictionaries*; Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 184, 204–10; Al-Qāḍī, “Biographical Dictionaries”; Roded, *Women*.

² E.g. Cohen, “Economic Background”; Bulliet, *Patricians*; Crone, *Slaves*; Shatzmiller, *Labour*; Melchert, *Formation*; and further Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 187–92.

³ E.g., the work of Fāhndrich and Leder; also Malti-Douglas, “Controversy”; Rāḡib, “Al-Sayyida Nafīsa”; van Ess, “Ibn al-Rēwandī”; Eisener, *Faktum und Fiktion*; Homerin, *Arab Poet*; Spellberg, *Politics*.

history and historiography, late-classical scholars described biography as a genre whose minimal topical and structural element is the individual human subject.⁴ In practice, the genre was indeed distinct from annalistic history and performed specific duties with respect to it. On this point the biographers are less forthcoming, but a close study of their works reveals a distinctive approach to the problem of historical inquiry.

As is evident from the popularity of works devoted to groups of people, Arabic biographers did not see their task as consisting primarily in the commemoration of individual lives. Rather, they used life-stories to document and perpetuate traditions of authority based on knowledge borne and transmitted, or merely claimed, by groups (*tawāʾif*, sing. *ṭāʾifa*) of specialized practitioners. By recording the activities of single members, biographers sought to demonstrate the legitimacy of the group's chosen enterprise as well as the place of individual subjects within the tradition. In seeking to account for both the documentary and belletristic aspects of the genre, this book hopes to show (among other things) that its "literary effects" arose in response to the need to negotiate crises in the history of the groups whose collective life the biographers had undertaken to record.

Of all the traditions of knowledge contested by the *ṭāʾifas*, none was more hotly disputed than the legacy of the Prophet Muḥammad. Muḥammad reportedly said: "The bearers of knowledge are the heirs of the prophets."⁵ The political and religious history of premodern Muslim societies was often envisioned by participants and observers as a struggle among claimants to this legacy of knowledge, and much scholarly attention was devoted to sorting out the claims. To illustrate how biographers applied this schematic notion of social order to the rough-and-tumble negotiation of that order in history, I have chosen four figures of the third/ninth century and surveyed the textual record of their lives. Each of these figures – the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn, the Shiite Imam 'Alī al-Riḍā, the Sunni scholar Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, and the ascetic Bishr al-Ḥāfi – claimed heirship to Muḥammad, or was declared to have done so by his biographers. Moreover, their respective claims ranged from the complementary to the flatly contradictory. Most helpfully for our purposes, each of the four also had significant contact with at least one of the others. As a result, their respective biographers had to address the claims made by representatives of rival *ṭāʾifas*. The collective textual afterlife of these four men thus permits a contrastive examination of the ways in which their biographers dealt with competing claims to authority.

The period during which our four subjects flourished, the first half of the third/ninth century, is fraught with dramatic events. These include the struggle between al-Ma'mūn and his relatives for control of the caliphate, the designation of 'Alī al-Riḍā as heir apparent, and the Abbasid Inquisition. These events, whose spectacular character made them prominent episodes in the

⁴ Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, I: 42; Suyūṭī, *Ta'riḥ al-khulafā'*, 4; Khalidī, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 56.

⁵ *Imma 'l-'ulamā'a warathathu 'l-anbiyā'*. Wensinck, *Concordance*, IV: 321.

biographies of those involved, are also symptomatic of broader trends. Al-Ma'mūn appears to have been testing ambitious notions of caliphal authority. The failure of both his major initiatives – the designation of al-Riḍā as heir apparent, and the Inquisition – set the stage for the eventual compromise with Sunnism. Sunnism itself first takes on a distinct political and doctrinal identity during this period. It appears first as a set of practices and opinions attributed to pietists like Ibn Ḥanbal, and emerges as the officially sanctioned ideology of the Abbasid caliphate. Shiism, too, was still in its formative period: though its major doctrines had already crystallized, its subsequent understanding of the Imam's role in history drew upon the experiences of the third-century Imams, including al-Riḍā'. Meanwhile, asceticism, at first often congruent (in Baghdad, at any rate) with proto-Sunnism, emerges as a distinct style of piety, laying the groundwork for the appearance of a new mystical tradition, Sufism. A study of the representatives of four leading traditions of heirship to the Prophet permits a synoptic vision of the conflicts and compromises that shaped later belief and practice. It also brings into relief the work of biographers, whose accounts of their respective heroes contain the bulk of the information we are ever likely to obtain about this formative period of Islamic civilization.

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Although my teachers, colleagues, and friends deserve most of the credit for the existence of this book, none is responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation it may contain. I do hope, however, that they will feel responsible for drawing any such errors to my attention.

Abbreviations

<i>EII</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> . 4 vols. and supplement. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1913–38
<i>EI2</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> . <i>New edition</i> . Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958–in progress
<i>EIr</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia Iranica</i> . Ed. Ehsan Yarshater. London and Boston: Routledge, 1982–in progress
<i>HA</i>	Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, <i>Ḥilyat al-awliyā’</i>
<i>KB</i>	Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr, <i>Kitāb Baghdād</i>
<i>ManIH</i>	Ibn al-Jawzī, <i>Manāqib al-imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal</i>
<i>MDh</i>	al-Mas‘ūdī, <i>Murūj al-dhahab</i>
<i>MU</i>	Yāqūt, <i>Mu‘jam al-udabā’</i>
<i>SAN</i>	al-Dhahabī, <i>Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’</i>
<i>TB</i>	al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, <i>Ta’rīkh Baghdād</i>
<i>TH</i>	Ibn Abī Ya‘lā al-Farrā’, <i>Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila</i>
<i>ThG</i>	Josef van Ess, <i>Theologie und Gesellschaft</i>
<i>TMD</i>	Ibn ‘Asākir, <i>Tarīkh maḍīnat Dimashq</i>
<i>TRM</i>	al-Ṭabarī, <i>Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa ‘l-mulūk</i>
<i>UAR</i>	Ibn Bābawayh, <i>‘Uyūn akhbār al-Riḍā</i>

Note on transliteration

This book follows the Library of Congress transliteration system for Arabic, but without indicating final *tā' marbuṭa* or distinguishing between *alif mamdūda* and *alif maqṣūra*. In connected discourse, the *hamzat al-waṣl* is indicated by an apostrophe. Technical terms and place names used in English appear without transliteration (e.g., Shiite, Baghdad), as do Anglicized derivatives of Arabic words (e.g., Alid).

Note on dating systems

Dates are given according to the Hijrī calendar and then according to the Gregorian (e.g., 230/845). When only the Hijrī dating is certain, the corresponding range of *anno domini* years is indicated (e.g., 230/845–46).

Glossary

This list covers terms used without explanation after their first appearance. Arabic expressions not included in the glossary are glossed in the text.

abdāl: see *badal*.

abnāʾ (sing. *banawī*); also *abnāʾ al-dawla* and *abnāʾ al-daʿwa*: originally, the Khurasani supporters of the Abbasid revolution; later, their descendants resident in Baghdad, whether soldiers or civilians.

adab (pl. *ādāb*): the cultivation of the literary and linguistic sciences.

ahl al-ḥadīth: students and teachers of Ḥadīth (q.v.), often synonymous with *ahl al-sunna* (q.v.).

ahl al-sunna (wa *ʿl-jamāʿa*): in the third/ninth century, a sect that stressed the importance of the *sunna* (q.v.), cultivated the Ḥadīth (q.v.), and rejected Imami Shiism and the *khalq al-Qurʾān* (qq.v.).

akhbār (sing. *khbar*): historical information, often conveyed in a narrative.

akhbārī: a collector of *akhbār* (q.v.).

ʿālim: see *ʿulamāʾ*.

al-amr bi ʿl-maʿrūf wa ʿl-nahy ʿan al-munkar: “enjoining good and forbidding evil” (Qurʾān 3: 104, etc.); an ideal of conduct invoked by the *ahl al-sunna* (q.v.).

ʿamma: the common people; among Shiites, a non-Shiite.

awliyāʾ: see *walī*.

ʿayyār (pl. *ʿayyārūn*): a hooligan or gangster; an irregular mercenary.

badal (pl. *abdāl* or *budalāʾ*): one of a limited number of holy men gifted with special powers of intercession.

baraka: the power to confer blessing.

budalāʾ: see *badal*.

daʿwa: a call to allegiance, specifically (1) the summoning of support for the so-called Abbasid revolution of 132/749; and (2) the summoning of support for al-Maʾmūn’s rebellion against al-Amīn.

faqīh (pl. *fuqahāʾ*): one capable of *fiqh* (q.v.).

fatā (pl. *fityān*): a young man possessing authority based on physical strength or endurance; a member of a criminal fraternity (often synonymous with *ʿayyār* [q.v.]).

fiqh: interpretive skill; the ability to discern the right course of action in ritual and legal matters; formal text-based jurisprudence.

ghayba: speaking ill of a fellow Muslim; backbiting, slander.

ghulāh: among Shiites, a derogatory term for those who ascribed supernatural powers, notably immortality, to the Imam (q.v.).

ghuluww: the doctrine of the *ghulāh* (q.v.).

Ḥadīth: an authenticated report of the Prophet's words or actions; the corpus of such reports (cf. *sunna*).

ʿilm: knowledge, often knowledge of Ḥadīth (q.v.) specifically.

imam, Imam, *imām al-hudā*: one who in his capacity as a Muslim leads other Muslims, whether in group prayer or as a head of state. Among Sunnis, it is used as a title for exemplary scholars (e.g., Ibn Ḥanbal); this meaning is rendered here as "imam." Among Twelver Shiites, it refers to one of twelve destined leaders of the Muslim community; this meaning is rendered here with capitalization ("Imam"). The caliph al-Ma'mūn (among others) referred to himself as *imām al-hudā* or "rightly guided and rightly guiding leader"; this title will be given in transliteration.

imāmat al-hudā: the office of the *imām al-hudā* (q.v.).

Imamism: the branch of Shiism (q.v.) from which Twelver Shiism (q.v.) emerged.

isnād: a list of the persons who have transmitted a report from one generation to the next.

kalām: a discourse on religion that employs syllogistic reasoning; theology; dogmatic speculation.

khalq al-Qurʾān: the belief that the Qurʾān was created by God, as opposed to being co-eternal with Him.

madhhab (pl. *madhāhib*): a school of *fiqh* (q.v.); a community of affiliated scholars.

maghāzī: the military campaigns undertaken during the Prophet's lifetime; a work describing these campaigns; a common designation for early biographies of the Prophet.

maʿrifa: mystical knowledge, as opposed to *ʿilm* (q.v.).

miḥna: a "trial" or "test"; specifically, the Inquisition put into effect by the caliph al-Ma'mūn.

mushabbiha: “anthropomorphists” (cf. *tashbīh*); a derogatory term for literalist Ḥadīth-scholars.

raʿy: “judgement” or “opinion”; a type of *fiqh* (q.v.) that could take place without reference to Ḥadīth (q.v.).

riʿāsa: the office or attribute of leadership; the attainment of a popular following.

riḍā, al-: an acceptable leader of the community; the title of the eighth Imam of the Twelver Shiites (and thus capitalized: “al-Riḍā”).

rijāl: literally “men”; the term for a sub-genre of biography that examines the reliability of transmitters of Ḥadīth (q.v.).

Shiism: the belief that the office of Imam (q.v.) may be held only by a descendant of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib.

sīra: literally “conduct”; a common title of biographical works, especially those dealing with the Prophet.

sunna: the exemplary practice of the early Muslim community; (pl. *sunan*) a report of this practice. Unlike a Ḥadīth (q.v.), a *sunna* in the latter sense can report the practice of any exemplary early Muslim.

Sunni, proto-Sunni: associated with the *ahl al-sunna wa ʿl-jamāʿa* (q.v.), either in its formative period (“proto-Sunni”) or in its later manifestations (“Sunni”; cf. Sunnism).

Sunnism: the mature articulation of the creed of the *ahl al-sunna* (q.v.), characterized by solidarity with the historical caliphate and communal organization by *madhāhib* (see *madhhab*).

ṭabaqa (pl. *ṭabaqāt*): A generation; a group of persons comparable in some way. Commonly used as a title of biographical works.

ṭāʾifa: a group of persons possessing the same expertise, holding the same office, or otherwise engaged in a common and characteristic activity.

taʾrīkh: a biographical work that provides the death-dates of its subjects; a historical work organized by year; history as a field of inquiry.

tashbīh: the assertion of a similarity between God and created things; anthropomorphism.

Twelver Shiism: the branch of Shiism (q.v.) that holds that the succession of Imams ended with the twelfth.

ʿulamāʾ (sg. *ʿālim*): literally “those who know”; a common term for scholars, especially scholars of Ḥadīth (q.v.).

walī (pl. *awliyāʾ*): literally, a friend or affiliate of God; a person credited with extraordinary piety and spiritual power.

waqf: among Imami Shiites, the belief that a particular Imam is the last of the line.

wāqifa: a group of Shiites professing *waqf* (q.v.).

wara': scrupulosity; the strict avoidance of the forbidden and the suspect, as gauged by the *sunna* (q.v.).

zāhid: a renunciant; an ascetic.

zuhd: renunciation of the world; self-denial; asceticism.

CHAPTER 1

The development of the genre

ANDREW: I want to return to this generation. I want to know about your life as a shaykh.

SHAYKH KHALAF: About me? About my life?

ANDREW: Yes.

SHAYKH KHALAF: Yes. At first there was [the tribe of] ‘Abbad. The shaykh of ‘Abbad back then was Kayid Ibn Khatlan. Shaykh of the shaykhs of ‘Abbad . . .

From Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan*¹

Akhbār, Ḥadīth, and Sīra

Until recently, modern scholarship (following Otto Loth) has tended to assume that classical Arabic biography arose in conjunction with the study of Ḥadīth and Ḥadīth-transmitters.² Muslim scholars, we are told, set out to collect information on the reliability of transmitters. Eventually they extended their inquiries “to other groups – legal scholars, doctors, Sufi masters, and so on,” with the intention of showing “that the history of the Muslim community was essentially that of the unbroken transmission of truth and high Islamic culture.”³ This understanding of the genre is accurate in some respects: classical Arabic biography undoubtedly emphasizes the notion of transmission, and some of the earliest collections do list transmitters of Ḥadīth. Yet the genre itself did not originate among the Ḥadīth-scholars. Were this so, we would expect the earliest compilations to consist exclusively of entries about transmitters. But, as Willi Hefening was the first to note, biographical collections on poets, singers, Qur’ān-readers, and jurisprudents are at least as old as the ones on Ḥadīth-scholars.⁴ Even older are the biographies

¹ Shryock, *Nationalism*, 12.

² Loth, “Ursprung.” Here and throughout I use “Ḥadīth” and “Ḥadīth-scholars,” not “tradition” and “traditionists,” for the reasons cogently expounded in Hodgson, *Venture*, I: 63–66.

³ Hourani, *History*, 165–66; see also Gibb, “Ta’rikh”; Abbot, *Studies*, I:7. For a summary presentation of (to my mind) a more correct view, see Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 204–05.

⁴ Hefening, “Ṭabaqāt.”

(*maghāzī*, then *sīra*) of the Prophet, which had attained a substantial bulk even before the appearance of Ḥadīth-biography.

This precocious variety assumes greater plausibility if we acknowledge that biography originated among those narrators, transmitters, and redactors whom Ibn al-Nadīm (d. before 388/998) calls *al-akhbārīyūn wa 'l-nassābūn wa-aṣḥābu 'l-siyar wa 'l-aḥdāth*, “collectors of reports, genealogists, and authors of biographies and [accounts of] events.”⁵ These figures, most conveniently designated *akhbārīs* or “collectors of reports,” first rose to prominence at the court of the Umayyad caliph Mu‘āwiya (r. 41–60/661–80).⁶ They professed expertise in the pagan sciences of genealogy, poetry, and pre-Islamic tribal history. Some of them were also authorities on the life and times of the Prophet – that is, the corpus of reports from which both *sīra* and Ḥadīth proper were later to emerge. The *akhbārīs*’ earliest works – when there were “works” at all⁷ – exist only in later citations. Nevertheless, it is possible to reconstruct the ways in which they defined the directions early Arabic historiography, including biography, was to take.

Much of the information collected by the *akhbārīs* consisted of or included lists of names, often in the form of genealogies. Indeed, the citation of genealogies was almost impossible to avoid. This is because Arabic names typically contained a series of patronymics (expressions like “son of” and “daughter of”) going back many generations. As a result, practically every name contained a family history that could serve as the nucleus of a collective biography. When they mention a person, the early *akhbārīs* frequently pause to comment on the ancestors mentioned in his genealogy. Alternatively, they start at the beginning of a family tree and tell a brief story about some or all of the figures in the list, as Shaykh Khalaf does in his interview with Shryock.⁸ The utility of such performances, then as now, is to serve as an armature for narratives and poetry that support tribal claims to past glories and present rights. Unless the interlocutor is familiar with the reputation of one’s ancestors, an unadorned list of names is not an effective genealogy. The minimal and possibly the earliest sort of Arabic biography thus appears to have consisted of a genealogy accompanied by a narrative. Werner Caskel, and before him Ignaz Goldziher, noted the close association of genealogy (*nasab*) and narration (*qasṣ*) in premodern Arabic literature.⁹ More recently, Shryock has demonstrated the interdependence of the two forms in the oral histories of the Jordanian Bedouin.¹⁰ Plausibly enough, bare lists do appear when the narra-

⁵ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 131–67.

⁶ Abbot, *Studies*, I: 14–31; and further Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II: 43ff.; Schoeler, *Charakter*, 46–48.

⁷ See, e.g., Leder’s reservations on the “books” attributed to al-Haytham (*Korpus*, 8ff.).

⁸ See, e.g., Ibn Hazm, *Jamhara*, *passim*, e.g., 117; for contemporary parallels, see Shryock, *Nationalism*, e.g., 51–52.

⁹ Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, I: 168, 170; Caskel, *Ġamhara*, I: 35.

¹⁰ Shryock, *Nationalism*, 65, 145, 319ff. On the relation between *ansāb* and early historiography see further Muṣṭafā, *Ta’rīkh*, I: 81–82, 98–99, 115; Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 49–54.

tor does not wish to pronounce in favor of one or another tribe. In Jordan, Shryock found that tribal histories (that is, performances of *nasab* and *qaṣṣ*) inevitably challenge the claims made by neighboring clans and tribes. The tribal *‘ulamā’* (as his informants are called) were reluctant to relate their histories for fear of provoking a hostile reaction from neighboring rivals. After one eight-hour session with a tribal *‘ālim*, Shryock reports that he succeeded in recording only a bare genealogy: the narrative component had “collapsed under the weight” of participants’ efforts to “negotiate an acceptable version.”¹¹ In many cases, the bare lists we find in early Arabic sources may have been compiled by *akhbārīs* working long after particular disputes had been settled or forgotten. In other cases, they may be artifacts of a written history that strove to maintain neutrality.

Besides genealogies, the early sources contain lists (*tasmiya*) of persons credited with particular occupations or unusual feats or attributes. Some of these lists appear to date back to pre-Islamic times: they name tribal celebrities such as arbiters, trackers, and even “men whose big toes dragged on the ground when they rode.”¹² As Stefan Leder has noted, such lists, like genealogies, “give expression to the perception of closed and independently acting social units.”¹³ In the Islamic period, the *akhbārīs* applied a similar principle of classification to a wider range of persons. These persons included prophets, Companions, caliphs, Successors, jurists, Ḥadīth-scholars, Qur’ān-readers, transmitters of poetry and rare expressions, schoolteachers, participants in feuds, people who were the first to do a certain thing, and people afflicted with leprosy, lameness, and other maladies.¹⁴ Because the placeholders in incidental lists were not necessarily related in any other way, compilers frequently added identifying remarks (*akhbār*) like those appended to genealogies.¹⁵ Again, the bare listing of names is a theoretical possibility, occasionally realized. More commonly, however, we find narration, or at least description, appended to some or all of the items in the list.

As the genealogies and *tasmiyāt* indicate, the first Arabic biographers (i.e., the *akhbārīs*) did not confine themselves to collecting information about Ḥadīth-scholars. Heffening’s discovery of early works on poets, singers, and the like confirms this view. Still, the oldest extant collection, the *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, does appear to be a catalogue of Ḥadīth-transmitters. Compiled by al-Wāqidi (d. 207/822) and Ibn Sa’d (d. 230/845), the *Ṭabaqāt* contains entries of widely varying length on Muslims of the first six generations. In many cases, it offers assessments of its subjects’ reliability as transmitters. However, it also contains many reports that have little bearing on reliability, as well as a substantial biography of the Prophet. This genre, certainly, is older than Ḥadīth-biography: a substantial *maghāzī* is attributed to Ibn Ishāq, who died in 150/767. At first glance, then, it appears that the compilers of the *Ṭabaqāt*

¹¹ Shryock, *Nationalism*, chs. 4 and 5; citations on p. 108.

¹² Ibn Ḥabīb, *Muḥabbar*, 132, 189, 233. ¹³ Leder, *Korpus*, 199.

¹⁴ Ibn Qutayba, *Ma’ārif*, *passim*. ¹⁵ E.g., Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, III: 87.

adopted the *sīra* as well as the list-form from the *akhbārīs*. Upon closer examination, however, it seems more accurate to suggest that al-Wāqidi and Ibn Sa'd were *akhbārīs*, and that Ḥadīth-biography proper, while doubtless influenced by the example of the *Ṭabaqāt*, appeared later and under different circumstances.

To justify this assessment, we must look more closely at the circumstances under which Ḥadīth-studies emerged as a discipline distinct from the collection of *akhbār*. In the Umayyad period, “Ḥadīth” – that is, *akhbār* about the Prophet – had yet to attain the status of a distinct body of texts. Of the *akhbārīs* active in Medina and Damascus in the early third/ninth century, we find several who claimed expertise in subjects that included, without special distinction, the corpus later codified as Ḥadīth. For example, the Damascene *akhbārī* Muḥammad b. Muslim al-Zuhrī (d. 124/741) is credited with knowledge of the Prophet’s campaigns (*maghāzī*), post-prophetic history, and “Ḥadīth.”¹⁶ The sweeping nature of this declaration suggests that his contemporaries had yet to enforce any strict classification of *sīra*-related topics.¹⁷ Al-Zuhrī himself was reportedly the first to use *isnāds* (lists of transmitters) to check the genuineness of Ḥadīth. G. H. A. Juynboll agrees that the systematic examination of authorities began at that time (c. 130/747, with Shu‘ba b. al-Ḥajjāj). However, he places the “structured collection” of Ḥadīth rather later: the two earliest compilers of *musnads* (books of Ḥadīth arranged by transmitter) both died in 228/847.¹⁸ The tardy but seemingly abrupt appearance of Ḥadīth proper has been corroborated by Joseph Schacht, who notes that the Iraqi jurist Abū Yūsuf (d. 182/798) commonly cited historical reports of juridical import without *isnāds*, while his younger contemporary al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820) differentiated between Prophetic biography and “legal traditions” (i.e., Ḥadīth) because only the latter had good *isnāds*.¹⁹ The implication is that the strict division between Ḥadīth and other kinds of history, that is, *sīra*, *maghāzī*, and *akhbār*, came late but took hold, in this case at least, within a single generation.

The new insistence on Ḥadīth as a distinct category, and on the *isnād* as a necessary concomitant of historical narration, evidently caught the *akhbārīs* off guard. One of them, ‘Awāna b. al-Ḥakam (d. 147/764–65 or 158/774–75) is reported to have said: “I gave up Ḥadīth because I couldn’t stand the *isnād*.”²⁰ Even in the middle of the third/ninth century, by which time the *akhbārīs* had given up Ḥadīth, the scholars insisted on denouncing them. Al-Bukhārī and Yaḥyā b. Ma‘īn, for example, called Ibn al-Haytham a liar, and al-Dāraquṭnī labeled Ibn al-Kalbī *matrūk* “abandoned” as a transmitter.²¹ In some cases, the critics appear to be condemning the *akhbārīs*’ ignorance of Ḥadīth proper, and in other cases deploring their failure to apply Ḥadīth-standards to the

¹⁶ Muṣṭafā, *Ta’rīkh*, I: 157–58; cf. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 146–159.

¹⁷ Hinds, “*Maghāzī* and *Sīra*,” 189–92. ¹⁸ Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 9–23.

¹⁹ Schacht, *Origins*, 75 and 139. ²⁰ MU, IV: 513; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 134.

²¹ MU, V: 606; 5: 595.

Prophet's biography and other historical narratives. Either way, it is clear that the Ḥadīth-scholars were the newcomers, and that their professional self-definition required condemnation of the older *akhbārī* tradition.²²

Most misleadingly for us, the Ḥadīth-men also retrojected their criticism upon *akhbārīs* of previous generations. Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767), for example, was regarded as an authority by his contemporary al-Zuhri. A century later, however, he was censured by Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) for "leaving things out and changing them" in his recitation of the Prophet's campaigns.²³ Similarly, the so-called "Ḥadīth" of Abū Mikhnaḥ (d. 157/774) was declared "worthless" by Yahyā b. Maʿīn (d. 233/847).²⁴ This pattern of retrospective condemnation has created the false impression that the early *akhbārīs* were sloppy Ḥadīth-scholars, and indeed that such a thing as "Ḥadīth" existed as a disciplined canon in the early period at all.

Ironically, however, it was precisely the formalization of Ḥadīth-criteria that left the Prophet's *sīra* and the allied biographical and historical genres in the hands of the *akhbārīs*. By the early third/ninth century, the Ḥadīth-scholars had committed their texts to compilations arranged by transmitter or by theme.²⁵ In either format, the Ḥadīth was now severed from the sequential narrative of the Prophet's biography. Admittedly, a given Ḥadīth remained formally identical to a report in the *sīra*: both consisted of a listing of transmitters culminating in a first-person eyewitness account, often in multiple versions. Yet the Ḥadīth-reports were now arranged by transmitter or by subject (e.g., prayer, inheritance, contracts, etc.), while the reports in the *sīra* remained a sequential set of narratives.²⁶ With these boundaries in place, the *akhbārīs* could produce Prophetic biographies without falling afoul of the Ḥadīth-scholars.²⁷ Thus al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822) was called "an authority on the Prophet's biography (*al-maghāzī wa 'l-siyār*), the conquests, and disputed matters of Ḥadīth, jurisprudence, and *akhbār*." Not surprisingly, "a number of Ḥadīth-scholars considered him weak," a typical reaction – as we have seen – to such broad expertise. Yet even those who questioned his knowledge of Ḥadīth were willing to concede his authority in other fields. "As far as biography (*akhbār al-nās wa 'l-siyar*), jurisprudence, and the other sciences are

²² See also Robinson, "Study," esp. 206.

²³ Ibn Ḥanbal, *ʿIlal*, I:17 and I: 22; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 136; MU, V: 220; Abbot, *Studies*, I: 87–91. Ibn Ishāq was condemned in his own time, but not for his *isnāds*: his major contemporary critic, Mālik b. Anas, did not always use them himself (Robson, "Ḥadīth"). Although some later authorities spoke approvingly of Ibn Ishāq (Guillaume, *Life*, xxxv–xxxvi), such assessments were often arbitrary (Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 163–90), reinforcing the sense that we are dealing with collective self-assertion through *akhbārī*-bashing rather than strictly individual assessments of transmitters. ²⁴ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 136–37; MU, V: 29.

²⁵ The first *musnads* are credited to Yahyā b. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, Musaddad b. Musaddad (both d. 228/847) and Nuʿaym b. Ḥammad b. Muʿāwiya (d. 229/848). Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 22 (on Musaddad see also Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II: 139, note 3).

²⁶ See further Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 77ff.

²⁷ On the mutual respect eventually established on the basis of this division of labor, see Schacht, *Origins*, 139, and note 6.

concerned, he is a reliable authority by consensus.”²⁸ Similarly, his scribe and successor Ibn Sa’d (d. 230/845) was called “an expert in the *akhbār* of the Companions and Successors,” not a Ḥadīth-scholar.²⁹ Admittedly, the *Ṭabaqāt* the two men produced is well supplied with *isnāds*, indicating that Ibn Sa’d, at least, had mastered the evidentiary protocol of the Ḥadīth-scholars. However, as Juynboll has pointed out, the book contains “hardly any” material that falls into the category of Ḥadīth, not even in the biographies of Companions in whose entries one would expect to find it.³⁰ The contents of the *Ṭabaqāt* thus illustrate the extent to which the earliest biographies, even of the Prophet, were the work of *akhbārīs*, not Ḥadīth-scholars proper.

As the contents of the *Ṭabaqāt* indicate, the *akhbārīs* had assumed authority over the biography of the Prophet as well as the lives of the Companions and Successors. It is clear why: in the beginning at least, the compilation of a Prophetic biography required expertise in pre-Islamic genealogy and history, fields that had long been the acknowledged province of the *akhbārīs*. In later periods, the closest parallel to the contents of the *sīra* does not appear in the writings of the Ḥadīth-scholars, but rather in the works of *akhbārīs*, particularly al-Madā’inī (d. 225/839–40). Al-Madā’inī is clearly an *akhbārī*: his works deal with the history of Quraysh, the conquests, caliphs, poets, and such odd subjects as wedding parties, coinage, and persons famous for their propensity to flatulence.³¹ To him are also attributed twenty-seven works on the Prophet, covering his physical appearance, his sermons and letters, his enemies and detractors, his military campaigns, the delegations he sent to the tribes, etc. The subject matter of the latter works thus corresponds to the contents of the earliest known recensions of the Prophet’s biography (those by Ibn Ishāq and Ibn Sa’d). These topics include pre-Islamic Arabian history, the Prophet’s mission, the resistance to Islam, the emigration to Medina, and Muḥammad’s negotiations and military campaigns.

Biography, then, originated among *akhbārīs*, not Ḥadīth-scholars proper, who in the early third/ninth century had barely come into existence as writers of books. By the third/ninth century if not earlier, scholars exclusively interested in Ḥadīth had begun to condemn the *akhbārīs*, including those of older generations, for failing to uphold the newly emerged rules for Ḥadīth-transmission. At the same time, they conceded to their *akhbārī* contemporaries the right to compose biographies, including those of the Prophet. This entente appears to have succeeded in part because many *akhbārīs* had acquired competence in the evidentiary protocol of Ḥadīth.

Professional specialization and collective biography

The history of *akhbār* after c. 200/800 becomes the history of the diffuse fields of specialization that emerged from it. These include not only Ḥadīth but also

²⁸ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 144; *MU*, V: 392–93. Note that *fiqh* in this period did not necessarily entail knowledge of Ḥadīth. ²⁹ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 145.

³⁰ Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 24–27. ³¹ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 149–52.

the various branches of *adab* (the literary and linguistic sciences) and of *taʾrīkh* (history). Many of these branches developed their own biographical traditions. Common to all the traditions was the notion of descent, now understood as a metaphorical rather than a literal genealogy. An examination of early biographical writing, whether by *akhbārīs* or Ḥadīth-scholars, bears out one element of Hourani's contention that biographers intended to establish "unbroken transmission." However, this transmission did not always have to do with "truth," as Hourani proposes. More exactly, it had to do with knowledge, an attribute of poets and singers as well as of Ḥadīth-transmitters. As we have seen, the Ḥadīth-men insisted on evaluating transmitters as well as (or instead of) the reports they transmitted. Similarly, biographers of musicians, poets, and grammarians felt the need to compile a catalogue of experts in their respective disciplines. In the apologetic prefaces they attached to their works, the *adab*-biographers made explicit what was implicit in Ḥadīth-biography, namely, the notion that professional legitimacy derived from the documented transmission of knowledge.

Rijāl-works and Ḥadīth-biography

The earliest biographical tradition particular to Ḥadīth-studies is the *rijāl*-collection, which consists of a list of persons named as authorities in the transmission of reports.³² One of the oldest extant examples confirms Heffening's suggestion that the genre represents a "special application" of techniques of composition already in use among *akhbārīs*. This is the *Ṭabaqāt* of Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ (d. 240/854–55), which groups transmitters by generation, tribe, and place of residence. Khalīfa also compiled a chronological history, and may therefore be considered an *akhbārī* of sorts. However, neither his history nor his *Ṭabaqāt* contains much *akhbār*. In the *Ṭabaqāt*, the information most important for Ḥadīth-purposes – namely, where and when the transmitter was active – must be inferred from the placement of that transmitter's name in the generational, tribal, and regional classes.

Much more detailed is the *ʿIlal wa-maʿrifat al-rijāl* ascribed to Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). However, its compilers evince little awareness of the organizational techniques in use among *akhbārīs*: the imam's comments on transmitters and texts are placed in whatever order they happened to be spoken during Ḥadīth-sessions. A roughly contemporary work, the *Taʾrīkh* of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) takes the transmitters' names as the unit of organization and lists them alphabetically for easy reference. Al-Bukhārī's entries are invariably brief, mentioning only the subject's teachers and students, e.g.: "Ismāʿīl b. Saʿīd b. Rummāna al-Yamānī; he heard Ibn ʿUmar; Yūsuf b. ʿAbd al-Ṣamad related on his authority."³³ The fragments of *rijāl*-criticism ascribed to al-ʿIjlī (d. 261/875) are only slightly more forthcoming: one transmitter, he says, was "a harsh and ill-natured man, but he knew the *sunna*."³⁴ As these examples

³² For a list of *rijāl*-works see Juynboll, "Rijāl."

³³ Bukhārī, *Taʾrīkh*, I: 1: 356; no. 1126.

³⁴ Cited in Muryani, "Entwicklung," 61.

indicate, the *rijāl*-critics had little interest in *akhbār* as such. Their comments are ascriptive rather than narrative, and almost always bear on the subject's reliability as a transmitter. This does not mean that the tradition could not grow: on the contrary, the contentious nature of Ḥadīth-criticism produced a farrago of judgements, pro and con, that had to be appended to the entries on individual transmitters. This process eventually culminated in the massive compilations of al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) and Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449). However, it did not result in anecdotal biography of the sort found in Ibn Saʿd's *Ṭabaqāt*. Even the long entries in late *rijāl*-books favor laconic assessments (albeit a great many of them) over extended narratives.

With the appearance of distinct schools of jurisprudence (*madhāhib*) came dictionaries devoted to their affiliates, who were often transmitters as well as jurists.³⁵ Such compilations, unlike the *rijāl*-books, are not concerned with weeding out unreliable transmitters. Rather, the compilers were intent on demonstrating the distinctive attainments of their school. To the extent that such a project necessitated praising affiliates and criticizing rivals, some biographers collected anecdotes with as much enthusiasm as any *akhbārī* (for the Hanbalī tradition, see chapter 4). Others, however, were still interested only in the transmission of Ḥadīth – not Ḥadīth in general, but the sequence of teachers of which they formed a part. As a result, their works consist of name-lists supplemented with such minimal facts as death-dates, teachers, and students.

In a study of one such collection, Rudolf Sellheim suggests (following Ibrāhīm Madkūr) that the brevity of the entries is due to the “abashedness and humility” of the compilers.³⁶ But this remark strictly speaking applies only to autobiography (and as it happens, is not true there either).³⁷ I would argue rather that long entries on Ḥadīth-scholars are only needed when membership in the group is being contested: that is, in *rijāl*-books. Lists of one's own teachers, on the other hand, document a figurative genealogy back to the Prophet. Instead of parentage, the relevant relationship is the equally successive one of hearing and transmission. The implied narrative of succession to the Prophet, not the idiosyncrasies of any of the men named in the list, makes the best argument for one's own authority to transmit Ḥadīth. An endless series of nearly indistinguishable entries does not therefore fail to take account of individuality. Rather, it succeeds in excluding it.

Musicians

A more explicit example of collective self-assertion comes from al-Jāḥiẓ' (d. 776/868) compilation on musicians.³⁸ The ancient philosophers, al-Jāḥiẓ states, divided knowledge (*ʿilm*) into four arts (*ādāb*). Of the four, Muslim scholars

³⁵ On the early history of *madhhab*-biography, see Melchert, *Formation*, esp. 145–46.

³⁶ Sellheim, “Izzaddīn.”

³⁷ See *Edebiyat* VII: 2 (1997; special issue on Arabic autobiography).

³⁸ Jāḥiẓ, “Ṭabaqāt al-mughannīn”; cf. Muṣṭafā, *Taʾrīkh*, I: 140 and I: 176.

quickly attained a precise knowledge of three: astronomy, geometry, and chemistry. Yet the fourth art, music (*luḥūn, ghināʾ*), suffered from neglect. People grasped its principles only by intuition, or by hearing of Persian and Indian ideas on the subject. Then al-Khaḥlīl b. Aḥmad derived a metrical system for poetry and music. His system came to the attention of Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī, who, with his greater experience as a performer and auditor, perfected it and made it into a science. Since then, every age has had its generation of musicians who learn from those before them, and who along with their musical skill cultivate various refinements of character. Unfortunately, biographers have not yet written about the celebrated musicians of al-Jāḥiẓ' day. To give his contemporaries their due, he has composed an account of "their characteristics, their instruments, and the styles they attribute to themselves and pass on to others," and arranged his account by *ṭabaqāt*, here meaning "categories of comparable excellence."³⁹ The biographies themselves have not survived, so the second part of al-Jāḥiẓ' project – the narration of individual lives within a master-narrative for the musician class – cannot be studied. Nevertheless, his introduction provides a relatively early and complete instance of the etiological narrative, that is, the story a biographer tells to legitimize his category of subjects and lay the groundwork for his exposition of the virtues of individual exemplars within the category.

Poets

Early *akhbārīs* took a particular interest in poetry, which like music soon found its apologists.⁴⁰ The early Islamic view of poets and poetry was preponderantly hostile. Although poetry survived the advent of Islam, it perforce renounced its claim to supernatural inspiration.⁴¹ Not surprisingly, the earliest biographers of poets do not adduce an etiology for their subjects. Instead, they argue for the importance of being able to identify good poetry, something mere amateurs cannot hope to do. In the earliest extant biographical work on poets, Ibn Sallām al-Jumāḥī (d. 232/846) begins with a complaint about declining standards. "Much of the poetry one hears is contrived and fabricated," he says, "no good at all, and no proof-text for correct Arabic." This is because "people have passed it from book to book without taking it from the Bedouin and without submitting it to the judgement of scholars."⁴² In response to a man who declares that he could appreciate a poem perfectly well without asking an expert, al-Jumāḥī replies: "If you like a coin but the money-changer tells you it's false, what good does your appreciation do you then?"⁴³ His attitude parallels (but does not necessarily derive from) that of

³⁹ Jāḥiẓ, "Ṭabaqāt al-mughannīn," III: 133; cf. Hafsi, "Recherches," 107–8.

⁴⁰ On poetic biographies, see Tarabulusi, *Critique*; Sezgin, *Geschichte*, II: 92–97.

⁴¹ See Qur'ān 26: 225–8, and further Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, I: 40–97, esp. 56; Kister, "Sirah"; Amidu, "Poets"; and Heinrichs, "Meaning," 121.

⁴² Jumāḥī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 5–6.

⁴³ Ibid., 8.

the Ḥadīth-scholars: antiquity and authenticity confer authority upon a text, the content of which cannot stand on its own merits without the imprimatur of the experts.

As in Ḥadīth-studies, too, the requirement of authenticity requires a foray into biography in order to establish the names and works of the most reliable authorities. Al-Jumāḥī explains that he has “classified the poets of the pre-Islamic, Islamic, and transitional periods, and ranked them.”⁴⁴ The result is “ten classes of four poets of equal skill.”⁴⁵ Unlike Ibn Sa‘d and Khalīfa, al-Jumāḥī constructs his *ṭabaqāt* on the basis of excellence, not geography or age. Excellence, in turn, depends on the twin criteria of authenticity and quality. Some poems and poets are more authentic than others: ancients more than moderns, and desert-dwellers more than urbanites. Within each category, moreover, some poets are better than others, and here explicitly aesthetic considerations play a role. Imru’ al-Qays, for example, is superior to other equally authentic (i.e., old) poets because “he invented things that no one had said before, things that the Arabs considered beautiful.”⁴⁶ Any biographical elaboration beyond these minimal facts is not necessary for a critical discussion of the verses. Most of the entries, accordingly, contain citations of poems rather than anecdotes.

A biographer of the next generation, Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), offers a more explicit justification for his work. Cultivated people, he says, refer to poetry when discussing “usage, grammar, the Qur’ān, and the Ḥadīth.” Like al-Jumāḥī, Ibn Qutayba conflates this philological standard with a literary one, for which he regards the ancients as the highest model. Provided they respect convention, however, some modern poets may attain parity with the ancients:

I do not consider the ancient poets any more favorably because they are old, nor do I think any less of recent poets because they are new. Rather, I consider both groups without bias, and give each its due. I have seen scholars who approve of, and anthologize, poor poetry just because the person who composed it lived a long time ago. I have also seen them denigrate solid poetry only because it was composed in their own time, or by someone they have actually seen. But God has not restricted knowledge, poetic talent, and eloquence to one age as opposed to another, nor has He made it the special property of one people while denying it to another. Rather, He has divided it and made it the common property of all His creatures in all ages, and made everything ancient modern in its time, just as every noble line has a humble origin. After all, Jarīr, al-Farazdaq, al-Akhtal, and others like them were once considered modern.⁴⁷

This bold statement has the effect of extending the biographer’s field down to his own time and then leaving it open for his successors. Indeed, Ibn Qutayba’s chronological arrangement permits future compilers to append biographies

⁴⁴ On “ranking” see Khalidī, “Biographical Dictionaries,” 57.

⁴⁵ Jumāḥī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 21–22. The actual arrangement is somewhat different, due perhaps to later interpolations (see Shākir’s introduction, 20–21). ⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 47.

⁴⁷ Ibn Qutayba, *Shi‘r*, I: 76, I: 62–63.

without disturbing the structure of the work, something al-Jumāḥī's *ṭabaqāt*-scheme makes impossible. Moreover, by using the poet's death-date, not the quality or ancientness of his verses, as his axis of organization, Ibn Qutayba foregrounds the poet as the subject of interest. Unlike al-Jumāḥī's entries, which contain little more than verses, Ibn Qutayba's include information on "the poets and their times, their abilities, their modes of composition, their tribes, the names of their fathers, and those who were known by nicknames or honorifics," as well as the events that prompted the composition of their poems.⁴⁸ Mere names, he says, convey little unless accompanied by "a tale, a historical event, a genealogy, an anecdote, or a verse deemed good or unusual."⁴⁹

Ibn Qutayba may have opened the pages of biography to the modern poets, but it was another biographer, Ibn al-Mu'tazz (d. 296/908), who treated them as subjects worthy of commemoration in their own right. In his *Ṭabaqāt al-shu'arā' al-muḥdathīn*, Ibn al-Mu'tazz treats only the poets of the Abbasid period, and goes even further than Ibn Qutayba in citing biographical reports as well as verses. In the anecdotes, he pleads the cause of the "modern" poets by suggesting a continuity between them and their ancient predecessors. Like the ancients, the moderns were given to strange mannerisms, debauchery, and the flouting of convention. The poet Abū al-Hindī, for example, died by falling off a roof in a drunken stupor, Abū Nuwās composed verse while intoxicated, and Abū Dulāma went carousing instead of accompanying his patron on the pilgrimage.⁵⁰ In his critical comments on the verses, Ibn al-Mu'tazz does not refer to "ancientness" or "authenticity." Instead, he repeatedly praises *badī'*, the characteristic literary device of the moderns.⁵¹ In another work, the *Kitāb al-badī'*, he argues that *badī'* appears in the Qur'ān, the Ḥadīth, and ancient poetry, and modern critics have no right to repudiate their contemporaries who employ it. In the *Ṭabaqāt*, he points out examples of *badī'* and praises the work of poets known to have favored the technique.⁵² Distributed as they are throughout the biographical entries, his comments add up to a practical characterization of the technique, an endorsement of it, and by extension, a vindication of his subject, the modern poets. Evidently his project was successful: by the time Abū al-Faraj composed his *Kitāb al-aghānī* (d. 356/967) it was acceptable to treat the ancients and the moderns together as subjects of biography, and in no particular order at all.

Grammarians

Like Ḥadīth-studies and poetical criticism, the sciences of language crystallized as a distinct discipline at a relatively early date. The first known

⁴⁸ Ibid., I: 59–60. For an example see Leder, "Frühe Erzählungen."

⁴⁹ Ibn Qutayba, *Shi'r*, I: 59–60. ⁵⁰ Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, 56, 91–92, 138, 195.

⁵¹ See further W. Heinrichs, *Isti'ārah*; S. P. Stetkevych, *Abū Tammām*, 5–37.

⁵² E.g., Bashshār b. Burd (21–31), Muslim b. al-Walīd (235–40), and Abū Tammām (283–87).

biographical works on grammarians are nearly as old as the early works on Ḥadīth-scholars and poets.⁵³ Among the earliest extant is that of al-Marzubānī (d. 368/979 or 384/994), transmitted in an abridgement by al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Yaghmurī (d. 673/1274). The original reportedly contained biographies of genealogists as well as language scholars, but the work as it stands is dominated by a concern for grammar and grammarians.⁵⁴ On the assumption that its abridgement omits rather than adds material, al-Marzubānī's work performed two signal services for the grammarians. First, it justifies grammar by characterizing it as a guardianship of the Arabic language, the medium of God's Revelation to Muḥammad and of the Prophet's Ḥadīth. Second, it documents the founder's transmission of this trust to his successors. Just like Ḥadīth-scholars, poets, and musicians, the grammarians could lay claim to a distinctive *ʿilm* conveyed intact through the generations.

Al-Marzubānī begins with a series of statements attributed to the Prophet and other prominent historical figures exhorting believers to cultivate good pronunciation and grammar. Then he recounts one anecdote after another showing Muslims, notable and otherwise, committing solecisms. After the last anecdote – in which Abū ʿAmr b. al-ʿAlāʾ (d. 155/772) deplores the miswritten sign-boards of the cotton-traders – al-Marzubānī brings in his hero Abū al-Aswad al-Duʿālī (d. 69/688). Abū al-Aswad, he reports, learned the principles of desinential inflection from ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib. Later he was commissioned by the governor Ziyād b. Abīhi to teach people the vowel-markers “because their speech had deteriorated.” Abū al-Aswad ignored the commission until, one day, walking along the river-bank in Basra, he overheard a Qurʾān reader mis-vowel a word and thus invert the meaning of a verse (Qurʾān 9: 3). He then said to himself, “It is no longer permitted me to neglect the people!” and forthwith invented a transcription-system for the inflectional endings ʿAlī had taught him. “He made the nominative, the genitive, and the accusative; and people flocked to him to learn pure Arabic.”⁵⁵ This origin-tale, which occurs in several variants, displays a conspicuous constructedness.⁵⁶ Abū al-Aswad refuses to teach grammar, or is forbidden to do so. This prohibition serves merely to set the stage for what happens next, namely, that he overhears a particularly flagrant error and reverses his position, thereby rescuing a community on the verge of inglorious collapse due to its members' ignorance of case inflection. Of course, he cannot really have done so, because several of the figures accused of committing solecisms lived long after his time.⁵⁷ Yet this inconsistency serves the biographer's purpose as well: had Abū al-Aswad succeeded in eradicating error once and for all, there would be no need for more grammarians.

⁵³ Hafsi, “Recherches,” 87; Muṣṭafā, *Taʾrīkh*, I:222. ⁵⁴ See Makdisi, *Humanism*, 165.

⁵⁵ Yaghmurī, *Nūr*, 4–5; also Ibn al-Anbārī, *Nuzha*, 4–7; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 60; Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 12: 4463–65; *MU*, III: 436–37; Makdisi, *Humanism*, 122.

⁵⁶ On *awāʾil* see Noth and Conrad, *Historical Tradition*, 104–8; Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 10ff.

⁵⁷ Abū al-Aswad died in 69, while e.g. Abū ʿAmr b. al-ʿAlāʾ, who deplored the traders' signs, died in 155.

Having described the origin and utility of prescriptive grammar, al-Marzubānī sets out to establish that Abū al-Aswad's knowledge was transmitted to subsequent generations (*yantaqilu 'l-'ilmu min ṭabaqatin ilā ṭabaqa*). He thus reports that "the most outstanding of [Abū al-Aswad's] disciples, and the most retentive, was 'Anbasa b. Ma'dān al-Fīl. When Abū al-Aswad died, the people flocked to 'Anbasa. When he in turn died, people studied with his best-trained pupil, Maymūn al-Aqran."⁵⁸ Each of those named will have an entry later in the book, and each entry will name the students who carried on the tradition in their turn. Sometimes, too, al-Marzubānī adds a story about how a particular figure came to join the class. The celebrated Sībawayh, for example, took up grammar when his Ḥadīth-teacher rebuked him for misusing the negative particle *laysa*. Like Ibn al-Mu'tazz with his poets, al-Marzubānī enjoys stories that illustrate his subjects' oddities. Even these stories, however, reinforce the distinct endowment of the grammarians. Abū 'Amr b. al-'Alā', for example, was happy to learn that al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf had died, not only because al-Ḥajjāj had been pursuing him, but also because the death-announcement illustrated the correct pronunciation of a difficult word. Another grammarian, 'Īsā b. 'Umar, was punished for refusing to return some clothing left with him for safekeeping; even as he was being caned, he used two unusual diminutives to protest his chastisement.⁵⁹

The early biographical compilations on Ḥadīth-scholars, musicians, poets, and grammarians illustrate the formation of what Leder has called *literarische Personengruppen*, a "secondary theme" of early historiography (to apply Noth and Conrad's terminology) which reflects the increasing professionalization of Muslim scholarship after the second/eighth century.⁶⁰ The Ḥadīth-scholars compiled lists of transmitters in quasi-genealogical chains going back to the Prophet, hoping thereby to affirm the authenticity of their reports. Al-Jāḥiẓ reached back to pre-Islamic times to dignify musicians. The biographers of poets and grammarians sought to justify their subjects' privilege by invoking the connection between language and the Revelation. In each case, biographers insisted that the *ṭā'ifa* met the dire need for experts in one field or another. By making a list of these experts, the biographers also made a case for their authority as critics. In *adab* as well as in Ḥadīth, the biographers considered their intervention a necessary concomitant of establishing new, self-defined fields of expertise.

The *ṭā'ifa* model

Of all the reformulations of group identity that arose with Islam, the most productive one for biographers proved to be that of heirship to the Prophet.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Yaghmurī, *Nūr*, 87. ⁵⁹ Ibid., 95, 30, 46.

⁶⁰ Leder, *Korpus*, 197ff; Noth and Conrad, *Historical Tradition*.

⁶¹ For the early development of this notion as a political and religious idea, see Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, to whom my debt will be obvious, especially in ch. 2 below.

The caliphs appear to have been the first to assume this mantle. This maneuver required suppressing the corresponding claims of Muḥammad's family, claims that were to resurface in the Shiite argument for heirship. However, not all the interpretations of Muḥammad's mandate were so absolute. Among the most influential was that of the Sufis, who proposed various plans for dividing the Prophet's functions among his heirs. The most detailed plan is that of Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988–89), who divided "those who know" into three groups: Ḥadīth-scholars, legists, and Sufis. Each group (*ṣinf*) specializes in a particular area – Ḥadīth, textual interpretation, and mysticism respectively. Each has its methods, technical terms, and exemplary practitioners. Furthermore, each group defers (or should defer) to the expertise of the others.⁶² Since al-Sarrāj was not a biographer, we cannot use his works to see how he would have applied his system to classify or write about historical individuals. But a similar blueprint for dividing religious practitioners into categories appears, at approximately the same time, in the work of another Sufi, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996), who based his scheme on a Prophetic Ḥadīth that divides the early Muslims into generations of forty years each.⁶³ According to Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), Abū Ṭālib "built upon" this Ḥadīth by listing the leading caliph, legist, Ḥadīth-scholar, Qur'ān-reader, and renunciant (*zāhid*) in each generation. The scheme appealed to subsequent scholars, who continued to fill in names for the later generations. The resulting catalogue covers fourteen generations, each forty years long, and names the outstanding practitioner in each of the five "aspects of religion" in each generation. In the fifth, for example, "the caliph . . . was al-Ma'mūn b. al-Rashīd; the legist was 'Abd Allāh b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī; the Ḥadīth-scholar was Yahyā b. Ma'īn; the Qur'ān-reader was Yahyā al-Ḥaḍramī; and the renunciant was Ma'rūf al-Karkhī."⁶⁴ Abū Ṭālib's appropriation of the Prophet's Ḥadīth presents the classical Arabic biographical project in microcosm. First, Abū Ṭālib proposes a division of religious practitioners. Unlike al-Sarrāj, he does not describe these groups as "heirs of the prophets," but the principle of functional division is the same. Then, in the manner of al-Haytham b. 'Adī, Ibn Ḥabīb, Ibn Qutayba, and other *akhbārīs*, he names representatives in each division. Organized by generation, the resulting catalogue is open ended, and can be (and indeed was) kept up to date by later transmitters. Such explicit divisions of religious practitioners into separate but complementary lineages may very plausibly have originated among Sufi theorists eager to carve out a place for themselves in a hierarchy unselfconsciously dominated by Ḥadīth-scholars and legists.⁶⁵

Whatever its origins, the division-of-labor model eventually became the most productive paradigm for collective biography. The most common term

⁶² Sarrāj, *Luma'*, 4–11. See further Mackeen, "Ṣūfī-Qawm," esp. 220; and Melchert, "Transition."

⁶³ Ibn Māja, *Ṣunan*, no. 4058; cf. Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 5:60–61.

⁶⁴ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talqīḥ*, 382–84.

⁶⁵ Mackeen, "Ṣūfī-Qawm"; Reinhart, "Transcendence," 9–10; and ch. 5 below.

for the collectivities themselves is *ṭāʾifa*, “group entrusted with an exclusive body of knowledge or characteristic activity.” Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229) applied the term to literary scholars, and Ibn Khallikān (d. 621/1282) to “scholars, kings, princes, viziers, and poets.” The longest catalogue is probably that of al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), who lists forty categories of persons about whom biographies have been written. They range from prophets and kings to lovers, lunatics, and gamblers. His younger contemporary al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1362) lists ten: Companions, Ḥadīth-scholars, caliphs, kings, officials, judges, Qurʾān-readers, scholars, poets, and a miscellaneous category that includes allies of God (*awliyāʾ*), preachers, physicians, astronomers, grammarians, theologians, and litterateurs. Al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), who represents the culmination of the classical tradition, mentions sixteen groups. They include prophets, Companions, exegetes of the Qurʾān, memorizers of the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth, grammarians and philologists, legal theorists, holy men, inheritance calculators, rhetoricians, legists, Qurʾān-readers, judges, and caliphs.⁶⁶ As these examples show, a *ṭāʾifa* could be an actual occupational group as well as an abstract category of biographical subjects. Some (e.g., “judges”) corresponded to contemporary professions, while others (e.g., “prophets”) were retrospective. Others again are sometimes retrospective and sometimes descriptive, e.g., “Sufis,” a group whose earliest exemplars did not always designate themselves as such. Conversely, the biographers did not write about every occupational group: no one to my knowledge ever composed biographies of prayer-callers, midwives, or garbage collectors, all of whom may have possessed a sense of communal solidarity similar to that ascribed to members of the more celebrated *ṭāʾifas*.

Al-Sarrāj identified the members of each of his three *Personengruppen* as “knowers” and heirs of the prophets. However, not all groups could claim descent from Muḥammad or any connection with religious scholarship. Of al-Suyūṭī’s sixteen groups, for example, three (scribes and essayists, calligraphers, and poets) have only a tangential relationship with prophecy, or none at all. Biographers of groups like these nevertheless endeavored to legitimate their subjects’ field of interest. A common tactic was to insist that their work, however far afield, had as its ultimate purpose the clarification of some aspect of the revelation. Yāqūt, for example, describes his literary scholars as experts in Qurʾān and Ḥadīth, even though many of them had nothing to say about either. However, they did know Arabic, knowledge of which “is religion itself.”⁶⁷ Another strategy was to expand the definition of knowledge. Interpreted loosely, the Ḥadīth about heirship to the prophets suggests that the possession of any kind of *ʿilm* qualifies a *ṭāʾifa* for heirship and a place in biography. Introducing his compilation on physicians, Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa

⁶⁶ MU, I: 33; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, 20; Dhahabī in Sakhāwī, *Iʿlān*, 84–86, tr. Rosenthal, *History*, 388–91; Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, I: 51–55; Suyūṭī, *Taʾriḫ al-khulafāʾ*, 1.

⁶⁷ MU, I:32. He still worried, though: “I do not deny that it would have been worthier for me to have spent my time at the mosque and at my prayers” instead of writing biography (I: 31–32).

declares that “the practice of medicine is among the noblest and most lucrative trades, and is mentioned extensively in Scripture and legal injunctions.” Therefore, “the knowledge (*‘ilm*) of bodily ailments has become linked with that of religion.” From this follows the necessity of writing about those “whom God has privileged with this knowledge,” pagans and Christians as well as Muslims.⁶⁸

Like members of a lineage, members of a normative *ṭāʾifa* have their single ancestor: the first person to gain the knowledge or perform the characteristic activity of the group. Moreover, just as each generation of a lineage gives birth to the next, members of a scholarly or occupational *ṭāʾifa* pass their mandate on from one generation of practitioners to the next. Finally, like individuals of common ancestry, members of the *ṭāʾifa* are theoretically interchangeable. All of them know or do the same thing, and their prestige derives from the degree to which they uphold the mandate conferred by the first generation. In his discussion of the exclusivity of biographical dictionaries compiled by the *‘ulamāʾ*, Tarif Khalidi affirms that biographers “made an explicit or implicit appeal to a doctrine of the elite, by whose labors and in whose lives religion subsists and is transmitted from one generation to the next.”⁶⁹ Of course, such a vision of the past necessarily resulted in a certain distortion of the historical record. Discussing the manifestations of self-awareness among intellectuals of the fourth/tenth century, Wolfhart Heinrichs notes that scholars used *awāʾil*-tales and back-projection to “create the impression that the same kind of compartmentalization with which they were faced already obtained a hundred or more years earlier.”⁷⁰ In many cases, it was the biographers who lent the early history of their *ṭāʾifa* whatever coherence it later appeared to possess, often by extending its history back into early Islamic times and sometimes even beyond. Typically, biographers used the introductions of their works to present programmatic expositions of the venerability of their *ṭāʾifa* and its indispensability to the community. They also used their subjects as mouthpieces for such expositions, or, more commonly, let their subjects’ words and deeds affirm the *ṭāʾifa*’s claim to authority. The case studies in this and the subsequent chapters will illustrate each of these processes in detail.

Despite its failure to correspond exactly to historical and social reality, the *ṭāʾifa*-model was no biographer’s fancy either. Rather, it corresponded to an important structure of self-presentation and self-perception. At the broadest level, as Roy Mottahedeh has shown with reference to Buyid society, medieval Muslims professed membership in a complex combination of kin groups, patronage institutions, professional associations, regional factions, and racial collectivities. The Buyid polity thus comprised numerous semi-independent and often overlapping social groups (referred to variously as *ṭabaqa*, *ṣinf*, and *jins*) held together by relationships of mutual loyalty among differently privileged members. These networks of loyalty operated at all levels of society,

⁶⁸ Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, *ʿUyūn*, 7–8.

⁶⁹ Khalidi, “Islamic Biographical Dictionaries,” 64.

⁷⁰ Heinrichs, “Contacts,” 255.

from the men of the regime down to food sellers, rag dealers, and cobblers.⁷¹ In Buyid society as elsewhere, however, only certain social groups – the literate classes and particularly the scholars – left substantial testimony about their perceptions of themselves and of other groups. These perceptions were strikingly schematic, as is evident from the scholars' self-classification into categories of specialization. In his study of classical Islamic "humanism" (*adab*), George Makdisi shows how scholars distinguished in practice as well as in theory between practitioners of the religious and the literary sciences, and within each of these broad categories, among numerous sub-fields. Each set of experts claimed exclusive possession of a body of knowledge deemed desirable for others to learn or necessary to the community at large. Although an individual scholar might attain expertise in more than one field (and many did), representatives of the two super-groups, the *'ulamā'* (religious scholars) and the *udabā'* ("humanists," in Makdisi's translation), often asserted their *differentia* forcefully enough to provoke mutual antagonism.⁷²

To this survey of the evolution of classical Arabic biography one development must be added: the compilation of biographical works embracing subjects of different *ṭā'ifas*. Modern scholarship usually credits Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282) with the first catholic biographical dictionary, but this sets the date about two centuries too late. Arguably, the first move back to comprehensiveness was the compilation of biographical dictionaries that took some criterion other than *ṭā'ifa*-affiliation as their basis of inclusion. For example, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071) included in his *Ta'riḫ Baghdād* anyone of importance who had spent time in the city of Baghdad. The work therefore contains biographies of subjects from a variety of *ṭā'ifas*, including "caliphs, descendants of the Prophet, dignitaries, judges, legists, Ḥadīth-men, Qur'ān-readers, renunciants, righteous men, littérateurs, and poets."⁷³ A century later, Ibn 'Asākir followed the same procedure for Syria in his *Ta'riḫ Dimashq*. A century later again, Yāqūt (681/1282) moved toward comprehensiveness in a different way by merging some of the *ṭā'ifas*. He collected biographies of "grammarians, lexicologists, genealogists, famous Qur'ān readers, chroniclers, historians, well-known stationers and scribes, epistolographers, eponymous calligraphers," and the like. All these he placed together in a work on a super-*ṭā'ifa* called *al-udabā'*, "people of culture."⁷⁴ Only after all this did Ibn Khallikān compose his *Wafayāt al-a'yān*. This work includes prominent Muslims from a wide variety of periods and classes. It organizes the entries alphabetically, a format which "entails mixing up the ancients and the moderns, and mixing up subjects of different categories,"⁷⁵ as the author says. Similarly broad policies of inclusion eventually resulted in such titanically comprehensive works as the *Siyar al'lām al-nubalā'* of al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) and the *Wāfi bi'l-wafayāt* of al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1362). Both compilers

⁷¹ Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*, 97–174. ⁷² Makdisi, *Humanism*, 1–200.

⁷³ *TB*, I: 227 (= old edn. I: 212–13). ⁷⁴ *MU*, I: 29.

⁷⁵ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, I: 20. On the work, see Fāhndrich, "Man and Men."

apparently tried to include every Muslim of importance (according to a certain definition of importance: the prayer-callers, midwives, and garbage-men did not make it in). In a sense this trend signals a return to the original impulse of Ibn Saʿd and his colleagues, who took all important Muslims as their proper subject. In another sense it anticipates the aspirations to all-inclusiveness of such modern works as the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

History and biography

Authors of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries do not oblige us with discussions of the genre within which their works should be classified. Even so, many works bear titles suggestive of an interest in life-stories rather than events.⁷⁶ These titles include *sīra*, “account of conduct,” *manāqib* “virtues,” *mathālib* “vices,” *maqṭal*, “death-tale,” *ṭabaqāt*, “generations,” *taʾrīkh*, “listing of death-dates,” and most broadly *akhbār al-nās*, “accounts of notable persons.” In later periods, we find *manāqib* and *sīra* used for single-subject biography, and *ṭabaqāt* used for collective biographies arranged in chronological order. The term *taʾrīkh*, confusingly, refers to annalistic histories as well as to biographical collections that mention the death-dates of their subjects. Similarly, the term *akhbār* applies to works that narrate historical events, but not by year; and thus also to collections of biographical anecdotes, usually about a single subject.⁷⁷

Perhaps because of these terminological ambiguities, later compilers often write as if history, or at least the history that mattered to them, were simply a collection of biographies.⁷⁸ Thus al-Subkī’s famous guidelines for the historian (*adab al-muʾarrikh*) are actually instructions for writing biographies (*tarājim*).⁷⁹ Similarly, al-Ṣafadī’s eulogy of *taʾrīkh* is actually a description of the benefits of reading biography. But these examples are misleading: in theory and in practice, the historians and critics of the late-classical tradition also evince a clear awareness of the distinction between the two genres. For al-Ṣafadī, the distinction arises from their respective arrangement of material:

Muʾarrikhūn have customarily organized their works either by year, which is more appropriate for history (*taʾrīkh*) because events and occurrences thus appear in order; or in alphabetical order, which is more appropriate for biographies (*tarājim*) because the entry on a particular person will bring together in one place events that befell him in various years, either in summary fashion as is more common, or, less usually, in detail.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ In this connection it is noteworthy that the poet Abū ʿl-ʿAtāhiya (d. 211/826) describes himself as reading a copybook (*daftar*) containing instructive accounts of historical figures (*Dīwān*, 439: rhyme *zāwiya*). ⁷⁷ For examples see Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 131–67.

⁷⁸ Gibb, “Islamic Biographical Literature”; Hamad, “History and Biography.”

⁷⁹ Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2: 22–25 (quoting his father ʿAlī b. ʿAbd al-Kāfi); cited in Sakhāwī, *Iʿlān*, 132, tr. Rosenthal, *History*, 372.

⁸⁰ Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, 1: 42; see also Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 56.

This definition implies that the two genres overlap in content, and indeed they often do.⁸¹ For example, even a cursory look at al-Suyūṭī's biographies of the caliphs reveals that he took much of his material from annalistic histories. Yet he evidently felt it necessary to extract this material and repackage it as biography. In his introduction, he explains why. Chronicles, he says, jumble together individuals from different occupational groups (*tawā'if*), making it difficult to find out about members of any one group. To provide this information, one must compile their *akhbār* separately. Al-Suyūṭī emphasizes the distinction by dividing his sources into two types: books on history (*al-ḥawādith*, "events") and books on "other material" (*ghayru 'l-ḥawādith*). The first set consists of annalistic histories (e.g., those by al-Dhahabī and Ibn Kathīr). The second set contains biographical compilations (e.g., those by al-Khaṭīb, Ibn 'Asākir, and Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī) as well as a number of *adab*-works (e.g., al-Mubarrad's *al-Kāmil* and Tha'lab's *al-Amālī*). For al-Suyūṭī, then, biography performed a function distinct from that of annalistic history. As a genre, moreover, it fell into the same category as literary and philological writing.

What then were the distinct functions of biography as opposed to annalistic history? A convenient illustration comes from the *ṭā'ifa* of caliphs, who seem inextricably positioned between the two. The narrative histories follow their activities in detail, and even the most laconic annals perforce mention them frequently. At the same time, we find biographical entries devoted to them as individuals, listed either in order of reign, or mixed in with entries on other notables.⁸² The caliphs therefore make the ideal test case for any proposal about differences between historical and biographical representation. More broadly, they also pose a challenge to the notion of *ṭā'ifa*-biography. The caliphate is the archetypal instance of heirship to the Prophet, and should lend itself readily to the *ṭā'ifa* model I have outlined. Formally, caliphal biography does conform to the model: one of the earliest extant compilations on caliphs, the *Ta'rikh al-khulafā'* of Ibn Yazīd, presents them as placeholders in a list that begins with Muḥammad,⁸³ while one of the last ones, al-Suyūṭī's work of the same title, treats them as a *ṭā'ifa* defined by Qurashī descent and the establishment of *de facto* power.⁸⁴ Even so, caliphal biography differs in one important respect from the other traditions surveyed so far. Those who documented the lives of Ḥadīth-scholars, grammarians, and the like were usually themselves members of the group, or at least advocates of its claim to knowledge. However, Ibn Yazīd, al-Suyūṭī, and all the caliphal biographers in between

⁸¹ See further 'Abbās' remarks on the interplay of the two in the work of Ibn Khallikān (*Wafayāt*, VII: 65–81).

⁸² For the titles of early works on caliphs and the caliphate, see Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 134–63; Abbot, *Studies*, I:80ff; Muṣṭafā, *Ta'rikh*, I: 122, 132, 162, 164, 210, 214, 220, 221.

⁸³ Ibn Yazīd (? = Ibn Māja, d. 273/886–87), *Ta'rikh al-khulafā'*.

⁸⁴ The work thus covers the Rāshidūn, the Umayyads, and the Abbasids down to al-Mutawakkil II (d. 903/1497), omitting "those who claimed the caliphate as secessionists and were unsuccessful, e.g., a good many Alids and a few of the Abbasids." The Fāṭimids he excludes on the grounds that their Qurashī descent was falsified (Suyūṭī, *Ta'rikh*, 4ff).

were not themselves caliphs, and only rarely display a programmatic intention to shore up the caliphal claim to authority.

As Noth and Conrad have shown, even the earliest treatments of the caliphs can be divided into two types: historical and biographical. Historical treatments mention the caliph whenever he plays a role in the event being described; but the event, not the caliph, is the focus of the narration. Biographical treatments of the caliphs, on the other hand, deal only with them, and consist of programmatic listings of vital statistics and sometimes anecdotes.⁸⁵ A comparable division holds true for later works as well. The histories, like those by al-Ya'qūbī (d. 284/898) and al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), proceed in chronological order, often year by year. They record the accession and death of each caliph, and record the events of his reign. Frequently, the caliph plays no role in these events and is therefore absent from the narration. The biographical works, on the other hand, consist of entries on individual caliphs, and tend to adduce *akhbār* in thematic rather than chronological order. Occasionally, historical and biographical presentations do co-exist in a single work. In such cases, however, they appear in separate sections. Al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh*, for example, contains an annalistic section for the narration of events and a separate section for caliphal biography (*sīra*).

Looking more closely at the biographical treatment of a single caliph, 'Abd Allāh al-Ma'mūn (the subject of chapter 2), we find two works that appear to blur the distinction between annalistic history and *akhbārī* biography. These are the *Kitāb Baghdād* of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (d. 280/893) and the *Murūj al-dhahab* of al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956). By Noth and Conrad's criteria, nevertheless, both works function as biographies, not histories. In the *Kitāb Baghdād*, al-Ma'mūn is at the center of the action. Frequently, he is the protagonist of the anecdotes. When he is not, he is often mentioned or described by others. Even when the text digresses into *akhbār* about his courtiers, the subjects chosen are precisely those dictated by the progress of the caliph's career. In the *Murūj*, similarly, the focus often wanders away from al-Ma'mūn, but his reign is the unit of organization that frames all the reports in his entry. Moreover, many of the reports are adduced specifically to comment on historical events mentioned only later, or not at all.

To understand how this sort of treatment differs from that of the annalistic histories, it will be useful to make a more specific comparison. As a model for the annalistic treatment, we may take the historical section of al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh*, which contains the most detailed and most commonly epitomized account of al-Ma'mūn's reign.⁸⁶ The text consists of documents as well as narrative reports. The documents include the Mecca protocol, by which the caliph al-Rashīd divided the rule between his sons al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn. They

⁸⁵ Noth and Conrad, *Historical Tradition*, 37, 76–96, 138–42.

⁸⁶ *TRM*, VI: 527–650 (annals of al-Ma'mūn's reign; related material appears in the preceding section on al-Amīn), 650–51 (summary *sīra*), 651–66 (anecdotal *sīra*); tr. in Tabari, *War and Reunification*.

also include the correspondence exchanged between the half-brothers as their relationship deteriorated, and the letters by which al-Ma'mūn commanded assent to the doctrine of the created Qur'ān. The narrative reports include an account of the civil war between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn; brief notes on the designation and subsequent death of al-Ma'mūn's Alid heir apparent, 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā; and a blow-by-blow account of the factional strife in Baghdad before al-Ma'mūn's resumption of authority there. Other reports mention official appointments and provincial insurrections. A particularly long sequence describes the interrogations carried out to determine the allegiance of the scholars to the doctrine of the created Qur'ān. The listing of events for the year 218/833 ends with a report on the caliph's death, followed by the separate *sīra* or biographical section.

Instructive as it may be in some respects, particularly in its citation of documents, the annalistic part of al-Ṭabarī's account is neither a complete biography nor even a complete history. It tells us almost nothing of al-Ma'mūn's life before he became caliph. He appears briefly when he is named as one of his father's heirs, and again only when the civil war breaks out. Even when it treats his years in power, the annalistic account confines itself to the outward course of events. It is preoccupied with dissention, conflict, and war, and gives the impression that al-Ma'mūn's reign, like the reigns of the other caliphs, consisted of one armed struggle after another. Moreover, it eschews commentary, discussion, and presentation of evidence for or against any explicit interpretation of al-Ma'mūn's behavior.⁸⁷ Admittedly the text includes such documents as Ṭāhir's famous "mirror for princes" and the caliph's Inquisition-letters. But we learn almost nothing about the intellectual and literary preoccupations that prompted the composition of these documents. Nor is there any mention of developments in the religious and secular sciences, of art and architecture, or social and religious movements, except when their representatives resort to violence.

The biographical sources, including al-Ṭabarī's own *sīra*-section, provide a very different picture of al-Ma'mūn's reign. For present purposes, however, the best example comes not from al-Ṭabarī but rather from al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj*. One day, the caliph al-Qāhir (r. 320–22/932–34) summoned Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-'Abdī, an *akhbārī* who possessed expert knowledge of the "characters and dispositions" (*akhlāq wa-shīyam*) of the Abbasid caliphs. Brandishing a lance, al-Qāhir demanded to hear about his predecessors: "Don't hide anything from me," he ordered, "and don't improve the story, or make it rhyme; and don't leave anything out!" Al-'Abdī agreed to speak only after receiving a promise that the caliph would not harm him. He then related brief biographies of the Abbasids from al-Saffāh to al-Mutawakkil.⁸⁸ The report on al-Ma'mūn runs as follows:

⁸⁷ The only explicit assessment I find concerns the civil war: al-Ṭabarī says that removing al-Ma'mūn from the succession "was not something al-Amīn thought of or resolved to do; in fact, he had intended to be faithful to the agreement and to his brother" (VIII: 374).

⁸⁸ *MDh*, IV: 313–14.

At the beginning of his reign, when he was under the sway of al-Faḍl b. Sahl and others, he made use of astrological predictions and felt compelled to heed their dictates. Following the practice of the ancient Sasanian monarchs such as Ardāshīr b. Bābak, he devoted himself to the reading and intense study of ancient books, and attained expertise in understanding them. But when you-know-what happened to al-Faḍl b. Sahl and al-Ma'mūn came to Iraq, he dropped all that and adopted the doctrines of divine transcendence and human free will. He held sessions with theologians and cultivated experts in disputation and speculation, including Abū al-Hudhayl and Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Sayyār al-Nazzām. Some of them he agreed with, and others not. He also made a practice of meeting with religious and literary scholars, whom he brought in from provincial cities and supported by regular stipends. Thus he stimulated interest in speculative reasoning. People learned how to discuss and dispute, and each faction wrote books defending its point of view. He was the most clement, forbearing, able, generous, and freespending of men, and the farthest from frivolity. His viziers and courtiers emulated him and imitated his conduct.⁸⁹

This report illustrates three distinctive functions of biographical as opposed to historical discourse. First, al-ʿAbdī assumes al-Qāhir's familiarity with the events of history: hence the reference to the "you-know what" that happened to the vizier, al-Faḍl (meaning his assassination in Sarakhs).⁹⁰ This presumption of knowledge on the reader's part is typical of biography, whether of caliphs or anyone else. Of course, not all biographical anecdotes require familiarity with the historical context. Witticisms and citations of poetry, in particular, often require only minimal knowledge of the persons involved, and no knowledge of specific historical events. Moreover, when a historical fact is particularly important, a biographer or his source will supply a summary account of the event in question.⁹¹ In general, however, biography tends to assume a knowledge of context, and this knowledge tends to be identical to the content of annalistic history.

Second, biography, operating as it does on the margins of history, serves as a repository for expressions of opinion.⁹² Al-ʿAbdī's report includes an assessment of al-Ma'mūn's character, a history of his intellectual development, and a characterization of philosophical activity during his reign. Such judgements are the special province of biography, which can offer them without worrying about the year in which they should be placed. As we have noted, the biographers of caliphs were not themselves caliphs. Indeed, they were often members of *īrāʾifas* whose claim to authority contradicted or competed with that of the caliphs. When writing annalistic history, a Ḥadīth-scholar like al-Ṭabarī could include materials that suggest disapproval of a particular policy or a particu-

⁸⁹ Ibid., IV: 318–19; also Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 77ff.

⁹⁰ Similarly, the remark about astrological predictions may be an allusion to al-Ma'mūn's nomination of an Alid heir in expectation of the apocalyptic end of the Abbasid dynasty (as suggested in Madelung, "New Documents"). That al-Ma'mūn sought signs in the heavens is confirmed by the "Risālat al-khamīs" (Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, 3: 379; Arazi and Elʿad, "Epître," 67: 49). ⁹¹ See, e.g., *TRM*, VIII: 665–66.

⁹² I am indebted here to Wallace-Hadrill, who argues that the Roman biographer Suetonius set out to supplement, not replace, the historical account of Tacitus (*Suetonius*, 8–22).

lar dynast. Yet this judgement remains implicit. In biography, on the other hand, the caliph's critics could praise and condemn him, seek explanations or excuses for his behavior, and even take a position on the legitimacy of his dynastic claims. A similar propensity for interpretation is evident in the biographies of lesser figures as well. Indeed, it is often only by consulting the biographies of the persons named in the annals that the modern reader can discern the texture of lived experience that lay behind the events the historians recount with such dispassionate concision.

Finally, al-Mas'ūdī's report suggests that biographical narratives derived their authority from appearing to be anecdotes in the literal sense, that is, undisseminated reports (from the Greek *anekdoton*, "not given out"). Al-Qāhir assumes that al-'Abdī is aware of family secrets that he has prudently kept hidden, even from those most entitled to hear them. He also suspects that al-'Abdī will rhyme, leave things out, and otherwise alter the story to suit his audience. To force him to speak, the caliph must threaten to punish him for silence in the same way that he would punish him for slander. For his part, al-'Abdī must persuade al-Qāhir of the accuracy of his account, which he does by reporting scandals. As he appears to have understood, only when al-Qāhir hears unpleasant things about his predecessors will he believe that he is hearing the real story. By reporting secrets, biography assumes an air of veracity.⁹³ In fact, the "secrets" al-'Abdī relates were hardly secret: they appear in al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj*. Even so, al-'Abdī's report commands interest, and exudes authority, because it offers (or purports to offer) insights into "character and disposition" that were missing from annalistic history.

⁹³ On the connection between secrecy and "true history" in modern Jordan, see Shryock, *Nationalism*, 109–10, 189, 237.

The caliph al-Ma'mūn

Go away and leave me alone with my deeds, for none of you can help me now, or avert whatever punishment might befall me. But stand together, all of you, and speak well of me if you can. If you know of evil I have done, refrain from mentioning it, for I will be taken from among you [and judged] by what you say.

From al-Ma'mūn's deathbed speech, as reported by al-Ṭabarī¹

Introduction

According to Muslim tradition, the institution of the caliphate began in Medina, at the roofed assembly hall (*saqīfa*) of the tribe of Sā'ida. When the Prophet died in 11/632, the community split into three camps. His daughter Fāṭima, her husband 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, and their followers "withdrew" to her house. The rest of the Meccan emigrants – the Muhājirūn – gathered around Abū Bakr and 'Umar. Meanwhile, the Muslims native to Medina – the Anṣār – assembled at the Saqīfa. When they learned of the meeting, Abū Bakr and 'Umar hastened to the Saqīfa as well. There they found the Anṣār preparing to elect a new leader and thereby wrest the leadership of the community away from the Muhājirūn. But Abū Bakr intervened, insisting that "the Arabs would not concede authority to anyone but this clan of Quraysh," the clan that included himself and 'Umar. One of the Anṣār then proposed that each side choose its own chief. 'Umar reports: "The discussion grew heated and voices were raised, and I feared that a split was imminent, so I said, 'Abū Bakr! Hold your hand out,' and he did. I pledged allegiance to him; the Muhājirūn did as well, and then the Anṣār."² This gesture of fealty made Abū Bakr the first caliph ("successor") of the Prophet in his capacity as leader of the Muslim community.³

As Wilferd Madelung has shown, the decisive intervention of Abū Bakr and 'Umar saved the notion of undivided authority similar to that enjoyed by the

¹ *TRM*, VIII: 648.

² Ibn Hishām, *Strā*, 4: 308–11; Tyan, *Califat*, 154–63; Lecomte, "Sakīfa."

³ For references to the caliphs as heirs of the prophet(s), see Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 2: 100–01; Tyan, *Califat*, 454; Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 31, note 29, and 98–99.

Prophet. Moreover, the argument that the succession to Muḥammad should abide in Quraysh was eventually accepted by nearly all Muslims of subsequent generations. Even so, the Meccans' definition of the caliphate had its costs. First, it eventually permitted the ascendance of the Umayyads who, although of Quraysh, were late converts to Islam. Their rise to power came at the expense of both the Muhājirūn and the Anṣār, and gave later generations cause to complain that the caliphate had become no more than a worldly kingship. Moreover, the coup at the Saqīfa conspicuously excluded 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. Insofar as Abū Bakr and 'Umar advocated a genealogical notion of succession, they had to come to terms with 'Alī's claim, which was arguably stronger than their own. This they did by insisting that prophets had no heirs, but 'Alī was not convinced. He did eventually become caliph, but too late to stop the ascendancy of the Umayyads.⁴

The Abbasid dynasty, of which 'Abd Allāh al-Ma'mūn (r. 198–218/813–833) was the seventh caliph, was descended from the Prophet's uncle al-'Abbās. The family came to power after anti-Umayyad missionaries calling for an uprising in the name of *al-riḍā min āl Muḥammad*, "an acceptable ruler from the Prophet's family," found enthusiastic support for their cause in Khurasan. The *riḍā* or "acceptable ruler" probably meant (as Patricia Crone has argued) a caliph to be agreed upon by subsequent consultation. In a process that remains obscure, an Abbasid rather than an Alid (that is, a descendant of the Prophet through 'Alī) eventually emerged as *al-riḍā*.⁵ The reasons for the military success of the revolution of 132/749 are complex and controverted. Broadly speaking, it appears to have capitalized on resentment of land-tenure and taxation policies that favored the central government and large landowners at the expense of the Arab settlers and the Persian peasantry.⁶ The Khurasani forces that overthrew the Umayyads have been described as consisting predominantly of Arabs, predominantly of Persians, or of some combination of Arabized Iranians and Iranized Arabs. Apart, however, from the ethnic composition of the troops, it was an elite of Arab and Arabized commanders, called the *abnā' al-dawla* or "sons of the revolution," who came to play the most conspicuous role in the new Abbasid government.⁷

Because so many of our sources invoke the Khurasani troops, particularly the *abnā'*, as the executors and sometimes the instigators of Abbasid policy, it will be helpful to understand the nature of their power in concrete terms. According to al-Jāhīz, the Khurasani *abnā'* boasted of having been the first to support the Abbasid revolution. In the beginning of time, they said, the Anṣār had come to the aid of the Prophet; now, at the end of days, the Khurasanis

⁴ Madelung, *Succession*, *passim*. ⁵ Crone, "Meaning."

⁶ Daniel, *Political and Social History*, esp. 189–99; Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 35–45, 177–87; Shaban, *Abbasid Revolution*.

⁷ On the *abnā'* see Ayalon, "Military Reforms"; Sharon, *Black Banners and Revolt*; Arazi and El'ad, "Epître"; Agha, "Agents"; Zakeri, *Sāsānid Soldiers*; Daniel, "Arabs"; Crone, "'Abbāsīd Abnā'."

had come to the aid of his Abbasid heirs. The *abnā'* prided themselves on their record against the Umayyads, and on their terrifying appearance. They dressed in long coats of wool, let their hair grow long, and sported curling moustaches. In combat, they rode with banners, clappers, and drums, and fought with lances, swords, battle-axes, and a sort of truncheon called a "pagan-basher" (*kāfir-kūb*). "We were created," the typical *banawī* would brag, "to topple dynasties, obey the caliphs, and support the state."⁸ Once settled in Baghdad, they took it as their home, calling it "the Khurasan of Iraq." There they appear to have served as an urban police force: al-Jāhiz' *banawī* describes his comrades as fighting in gateways, trenches, arcades, alleys, and prisons.⁹

Once secure in power, the Abbasids used fabricated historical reports to articulate an anti-Umayyad and anti-Alid narrative of manifest destiny for their dynasty.¹⁰ They declared the Umayyads, descendants of the Prophet's enemies, to have been usurpers, and insisted that the caliphate belonged rather to the descendants of the Prophet's family. This of course forced them to argue against the claims of the Alids, which they did by emphasizing the primacy of Muḥammad's uncle, their ancestor al-ʿAbbās, over his descendants in the female line. Alternatively, they accepted the Alid claims but then argued that a descendant of ʿAlī had transferred the imamate to a descendant of al-ʿAbbās.¹¹

In the event, however, the most important threat to their dynasty was not the Alids but the Khurasanis. Despite their debt to the local families that had supported their cause, the Abbasid caliphs proved no less determined to wring Khurasan for its revenue than the Umayyads had been. The exactions imposed by one Abbasid governor, ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā b. Māhān, once again provoked the Khurasanis to rise against the central government.¹² The ailing caliph al-Rashīd marched east to suppress the rebellion but died while on campaign, leaving the empire to be ruled by his son Muḥammad al-Amīn. Another son, ʿAbd Allāh al-Maʾmūn, had accompanied al-Rashīd to Khurasan. After his father's death, he remained in Marv (now called Mary, in present-day Turkmenistan) as governor of the province. Five years later, a second Khurasani revolution brought him to power as the seventh caliph of the Abbasid dynasty.

Al-Maʾmūn in history

ʿAbd Allāh was born in Baghdad in 170/786, reportedly on the very night his father al-Rashīd succeeded to the caliphate. ʿAbd Allāh is described as "light-complexioned with a yellowish cast, with large eyes and a long, fine beard streaked with grey; narrow in the forehead, with a mole on one cheek."¹³ His

⁸ Jāhiz, "Manāqib," I: 14–21.

⁹ Ibid., 26–27; Crone, "'Abbāsīd Abnā'," 18–19.

¹⁰ Lassner, *Islamic Revolution*.

¹¹ Ibid., 55–71; Crone, "Meaning," 102–03.

¹² Daniel, *Political and Social History*, 125–82.

¹³ *TB X*: 182 (no. 5330).

mother Marājil, a Persian concubine, died soon after his birth. Tales of his childhood compare him favorably to his frivolous half-brother Muḥammad, six months his junior. But while 'Abd Allāh was only half Arab, Muḥammad was of full-blooded Qurashī descent through his mother Zubayda, who pressed al-Rashīd to name her son heir apparent. Al-Rashīd was reportedly torn between her pleas and his conviction that the studious 'Abd Allāh would make a better ruler.¹⁴ Eventually, he nominated Muḥammad (with the title of al-Amīn) to succeed him, and 'Abd Allāh (with the title of al-Ma'mūn) to follow as second successor. According to the documentary sources, al-Rashīd also stipulated that al-Ma'mūn be given exclusive sovereignty over the province of Khurasan. As Tayeb El-Hibri has shown, however, it is more likely that al-Ma'mūn was supposed to serve as a military governor subject to al-Amīn. Al-Rashīd's "stipulation," with all its attendant conditions and limitations on caliphal power, was retrojected into the sources to justify al-Ma'mūn's later rebellion against al-Amīn.¹⁵

Upon al-Rashīd's death in 193/809, al-Ma'mūn assumed the governorship of Khurasan and established his capital in Marv. When al-Amīn, now the caliph, asserted the right to collect revenues and appoint officials in Khurasan, al-Ma'mūn resisted his demands. He also took to calling himself the *imām al-hudā* or "rightly guiding leader." His understanding of this title emerges from a later document, a letter to the army ("Risālat al-khamīs") which he wrote after the civil war.¹⁶ In the letter, al-Ma'mūn tells his Khurasani supporters that the rule (by which he evidently means the imamate and the caliphate, interchangeably) belongs to the Prophet's descendants. The rightful leader of the community is chosen by God, not by men, and therefore commands the absolute loyalty of his subjects. The leader's responsibility, in turn, is to guide the community aright.¹⁷ It is not clear whether al-Ma'mūn had espoused this sweeping definition of the imamate before the breakdown of relations with al-Amīn, or whether it arose in the course of the conflict that followed. In any event, his claim to military, administrative, and fiscal independence was provocative enough.

Al-Amīn responded by excluding al-Ma'mūn from the succession and dispatching an army to reassert caliphal sovereignty in Khurasan. The historical sources depict this response as a violation of the Mecca protocol. As El-Hibri has shown, however, al-Rashīd's original protocol was probably more

¹⁴ See, e.g., *MDh*, III: 362–63. But cf. El-Hibri, "Harun," esp. 463, and "Regicide," 337–39, from which it seems plausible that these accounts represent later pro-Ma'mūnid fabrications.

¹⁵ El-Hibri, "Harun"; Arazi and El'ad, "Épître," 66: 39–40 and 44, suggest a similar reading of the "Risālat al-khamīs".

¹⁶ Šafwat, *Jamhara*, III: 377–97; tr. Arazi and El'ad, "Épître," 67: 47–70. Arazi and El'ad place its composition between 202 and 204 (*ibid.*, 67: 39–40, note 141). Yet it says nothing at all about the designation of 'Alī al-Riḍā, which took place in 201, and to which one would expect some allusion given the subject of the letter. If anything, the document reads as if the caliph were trying to prepare his partisans for the designation.

¹⁷ Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, 140–44; Arazi and El'ad, "Épître," 66: 44–49.

favorable to al-Amīn than our sources knew or were willing to acknowledge.¹⁸ More fundamentally, as Elton Daniel has argued, the war was the latest campaign in the long battle between the province and the central governments that had sought to exploit it as a source of revenue. Al-Amīn and his advisors represented the centralizing impulse, while al-Ma'mūn and his advisors in effect advocated what Daniel calls "Khurasani particularism." Al-Ma'mūn's promises to lift certain taxes and to reform the administration, as well as his cultivation of the local aristocracy, all suggest that he had indeed taken local interests to heart.¹⁹ Indeed, he represented his campaign against the Abbasid caliphate as a re-enactment of the revolution of 132/749, calling his cause the "second *da'wa*," i.e., the second call to revolution.²⁰

As we have seen, the *abnā' al-dawla* who had followed the Abbasids to Iraq had become Iraqi rather than Khurasani in their loyalties. Their descendants, still called *abnā'*, thus took up arms in defense of al-Amīn. Meanwhile, those *abnā'* whose families had remained in Khurasan, or who happened to be in Marv when the war broke out, were recruited to fight for al-Ma'mūn. Al-Ma'mūn's commander, Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn, was apparently a descendant of one of the original *abnā' al-dawla*.²¹ Many of his troops, however, were "unasimilated, half converted, or unconverted Iranians" and Turks.²² In the fratricidal conflict that ensued, the forces of al-Ma'mūn's second *da'wa* routed a succession of Iraqi armies and laid siege to the Abbasid capital. As the Baghdad *abnā'* deserted in the face of Ṭāhir's threats to confiscate their estates, al-Amīn and his commanders armed the citizens (*ahl al-arbāḍ*) and paid "naked men," "prisoners," and "hooligans" (*'ayyārūn*) to defend the capital.²³ "The catapults pounded away at both banks," al-Mas'ūdī reports, "and fires and demolitions ravaged Baghdad, al-Karkh, and other places on both sides of the [Tigris] river. The glories of the city fell into ruin . . . People fled from place to place, and fear was everywhere . . . The mosques were left empty, and prayer stopped."²⁴ Al-Amīn was killed, reportedly on Ṭāhir's orders, while trying to flee the city.²⁵ With his half-brother's death (198/813), al-Ma'mūn was proclaimed caliph in the major towns of the empire, although he continued to hold court in Marv. He eventually appointed Ṭāhir to the governorship of Khurasan, where the victorious commander and his descendants realized the perennial hope of the local population, namely, that the provincial revenues be spent locally, at least in part.²⁶

In 201/817, al-Ma'mūn dealt a second blow to the Abbasid dynasty by naming an Alid, that is, a descendant of the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, to succeed him as caliph. In his announcement of the desig-

¹⁸ El-Hibri, "Harun." ¹⁹ Daniel, *Political and Social History*, 175–99.

²⁰ Arazi and El'ad, "Epître," 67: 39–46. ²¹ Kaabi, "Origines."

²² Crone, "'Abbāsīd Abnā'," 14.

²³ Hoffmann, "Pöbel"; see also Cahen, "Mouvements"; Sabari, *Mouvements*, esp. 77–100; Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*, 157–58; Cheikh-Moussa, "Historien"; Crone, "'Abbāsīd Abnā'," 18.

²⁴ *MDh*, IV: 412–13. ²⁵ Cf. Arazi and El'ad, "Epître," 66: 44; El-Hibri, "Regicide."

²⁶ See Daniel, *Political and Social History*, 198–99; cf. Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 166.

nation, al-Ma'mūn expresses himself in a style similar to that of the "Risālat al-khamīs". He declares that he has "wearied his body, has caused his eye to be sleepless, and has given prolonged thought" to the succession. After examining the members of the Abbasid and Alid houses, he has found no one more virtuous, scrupulous, and learned than the Alid 'Alī b. Mūsā. He therefore declares 'Alī his heir apparent, conferring upon him the title of al-Riḍā. Inspired ultimately by God, this decision regarding the succession is binding on the Muslim community.²⁷

Faced with this declaration, many modern scholars have confessed puzzlement. Given al-Ma'mūn's claim to be one of a series of rightly guided imams, why would he confer the succession upon a member of another house? As Francesco Gabrieli has shown, al-Ma'mūn displayed every evidence of sympathy for the injustices suffered by the descendants of 'Alī, and continued to espouse pro-Alid policies throughout his reign.²⁸ More important, perhaps, he regarded both the Alids and the Abbasids as members of the Prophet's family, and thus equally qualified to assume the imamate.²⁹ His gift of his daughter in marriage to 'Alī al-Riḍā's son affirmed this tie, and may even have been intended to produce a line of imams with combined ancestry. In any event, the elevation of the Abbasids to the status of *ahl al-bayt* could only redound to their advantage. The Abbasids, admittedly, could trace their lineage back to the Prophet's uncle, al-'Abbās. However, this claim lacked the charismatic appeal of direct descent through 'Alī and Fāṭima, as is evident from the efforts of Abbasid propagandists to claim that the privileges of such descent had been transferred to the Abbasids.

Apart from its theoretical justification, al-Ma'mūn's choice of a specifically Alid successor appears natural enough given the animosity between him and his Abbasid relatives. The second *da'wa* had not only split the ranks of the *abnā'* but also introduced a new contingent of unassimilated Iranian troops (*'ajam*) – the ones blamed, as it happens, for the murder of al-Amīn.³⁰ The Abbasids and their supporters cannot have trusted al-Ma'mūn, nor he them. Having, however, broken the power of the Baghdad caliphate, he was entitled – indeed, obligated – to dispose of the succession in the manner he saw fit.³¹ In the event, his decision did not represent a radical departure from the stated objectives of the original Abbasid *da'wa*. As Crone has shown, many of the so-called Abbasid revolutionaries of 132/749 had expected that *al-riḍā*, "the

²⁷ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Munazam*, X: 93–99; tr. in Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 133–39.

²⁸ Gabrieli, *Ma'mūn*, 29ff. See also Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 157–58, on the continuity between al-Ma'mūn's pro-Alid policies and those of his predecessor al-Mahdī.

²⁹ Madelung, *Imam al-Qāsim*, 75. Arazī and El'ad have the impression that the "Risālat al-khamīs" excludes the Alids from the imamic succession (Arazī and El'ad, *Epître*, 67: 58, n. 183). Rather, it affirms that there have always been imams chosen from among the Prophet's descendants (*ahl al-bayt*), including the Abbasids (e.g., Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, III: 386). The only Hāshimī specifically excluded is al-Amīn, who failed in his charge and was rightfully deposed.

³⁰ *TRM* VIII: 486–87. Al-Amīn was killed by *'ajam* speaking Persian; he died calling for help from the *abnā'*. ³¹ Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, 422–23; El-Hibri, "Regicide," 348.

acceptable leader," would turn out to be an Alid.³² By calling his successor al-Riḍā, al-Ma'mūn evidently meant to invoke and fulfill the promise that had brought the Abbasids to power, arguably under false pretenses, more than half a century before.³³

Given his declared position on the imamate, not to mention his political predicament, al-Ma'mūn's designation of an Alid successor was hardly the quixotic aberration it may appear in retrospect. Even so, the designation was disingenuous in one respect. 'Alī al-Riḍā, the designated heir apparent, was not merely a prominent member of the Alid house. Rather, he was regarded by many contemporary Shiites as the eighth of a line of legitimate Imams³⁴ descended from 'Alī and Fāṭima. His grandfather, Ja'far al-Šādiq (d. 148/765), had taught that one Alid in each generation was the true if unacknowledged leader of the Muslim community. This Imam was an infallible interpreter of the law, and his guidance was indispensable for the attainment of salvation. Ja'far himself was recognized as Imam of his age by his followers, as was his son Mūsā al-Kāẓim. When al-Kāẓim died (183/799), some of his followers insisted that he had been the last Imam. Others, however, declared that the imamate had passed to his son 'Alī b. Mūsā. Before the issue could be resolved, the news came that al-Ma'mūn had named 'Alī b. Mūsā his heir apparent.³⁵ In the document of designation, al-Ma'mūn nowhere acknowledges al-Riḍā's status as an Imam of the Shia. The Shiite understanding of this office was incompatible with al-Ma'mūn's; indeed, it necessarily implied the illegitimacy of the Abbasid caliphate. The caliph may therefore have regarded the designation as a way of bringing the Shiites back into the fold, as Madelung has suggested; or as a way to discredit the premises of Imami Shiism, as Tilman Nagel's account implies and as the Shiite sources frankly claim.³⁶

Both of these claims are plausible, although there is no direct evidence for either of them. There is, however, direct evidence that al-Ma'mūn was concerned with more pressing matters than al-Riḍā's claim to the imamate. After his heir apparent's death, the caliph wrote a conciliatory letter to his Abbasid relatives. When they replied with a torrent of abuse, he responded in kind. In this second letter, he excoriates the Abbasids for their obstinacy and corruption and embarks on a passionate defense of the historical rights of the Alid family. Then, referring to cryptic predictions vouchsafed to him by his father, he confesses that he nominated al-Riḍā in expectation of the apocalyptic end

³² Crone, "Meaning"; on *al-riḍā* see further Arjomand, "Crisis," 491–92; and on the cognate title *al-marḍī*, Bonner, "Al-Khalīfa al-Marḍī."

³³ Sourdel, "Politique," plausibly cites Mu'tazilī and Zaydī notions of the imamate as influences upon al-Ma'mūn. Cf. however Madelung, *Imam al-Qāsim*, 74.

³⁴ On "Imam," "imam," and *imām al-hudā*, see glossary.

³⁵ The implications of this turn of events on the Imami community will be discussed in chapter 3.

³⁶ Madelung, *Imam al-Qāsim*, 75; Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, 414–24. The suggestion that al-Ma'mūn nominated al-Riḍā to win over Alid rebels seems implausible given that the rebellion of Abū al-Sarāyā in Kūfa had already been quelled at the time of the appointment (*ibid.*, 414).

of the Abbasid dynasty.³⁷ This confession, which Madelung and van Ess are inclined to accept,³⁸ need not be taken as a complete explanation of the caliph's motives at the time he announced the designation. It is nevertheless compatible with the other motives outlined above. If al-Ma'mūn thought that he was destined to be the last Abbasid caliph, he had all the more reason to nominate an Alid rather than an Abbasid heir.³⁹

The Abbasids and the *abnā'* were appalled by the designation of al-Riḍā, blaming it on the machinations of the caliph's vizier al-Faḍl b. Sahl.⁴⁰ In Baghdad, the Abbasids annulled their allegiance to al-Ma'mūn and appointed in his place his uncle, Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī. Ibrāhīm, previously famous only as a singer, displayed great initiative, battling al-Ma'mūn's representative al-Ḥasan b. Sahl on the one hand and the Baghdad vigilantes on the other.⁴¹ These vigilantes were led by Sahl b. Salāma and Khālid al-Daryūsh, who promised to restore law and order by enforcing the Qur'ānic command to enjoin good and forbid evil (*al-amr bi 'l-ma'rūf wa 'l-nahy 'an al-munkar*; 3: 104, etc.). In practice, this meant organizing the citizens against the depredations of the *'ayyārūn* and the unpaid caliphal soldiery stationed in Baghdad. The viziers al-Ḥasan and al-Faḍl kept al-Ma'mūn unaware of the Abbasid counter-caliphate, telling him that Ibrāhīm was merely governing as his representative. It was reportedly the heir apparent, 'Alī al-Riḍā, who revealed to al-Ma'mūn the extent of the chaos in Iraq. The caliph responded by setting out, albeit at a leisurely pace, for Baghdad. During the journey, the vizier al-Faḍl was murdered in a bathhouse at Sarakhs. Shortly thereafter, 'Alī al-Riḍā also died, reportedly of a surfeit of grapes.

Al-Ma'mūn displayed great grief at his heir apparent's demise, and retained for a time the green uniforms and banners adopted (instead of the Abbasid black) at the accession ceremony. He also tried to persuade another Alid to accept the designation as heir apparent.⁴² Yet the timing of al-Riḍā's death, especially in conjunction with that of al-Faḍl, has led many historians to conclude that the caliph did away with them to placate his disgruntled Abbasid relatives. As John Nawas has noted, al-Riḍā happened to die very near the spot where al-Rashīd, al-Ma'mūn's father, was buried.⁴³ The implication, perhaps, is that the visit to his father's tomb put al-Ma'mūn in mind of his obligations to his family, and overcame his compunctions about doing away with al-Riḍā. The later Shiite sources, certainly, are nearly unanimous in accusing the caliph

³⁷ Madelung, "New Documents," 340–42.

³⁸ Ibid., 345–46; *ThG*, III: 154; cf. Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 94–95.

³⁹ The letter may also explain why the "Risālat al-khamīs" refers to the Abbasids as the last of the Prophet's line (*khātām mūrāthihi*: Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, III: 386).

⁴⁰ On the *abnā'* objections see Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rīkh*, II: 547; Jahshiyārī, *Wuzarā'*, 312–14; Crone, "Abbāsīd Abnā'," 10. Gabrieli (*Ma'mūn*, 32–34) argues convincingly that al-Faḍl was not involved. Jahshiyārī's report suggests that the vizier merely defended the designation to the disgruntled *abnā'*. See further appendix.

⁴¹ For a detailed account see Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 151–62; on Ibrāhīm see Menard, "Ibrahim." ⁴² Ṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 416–17; see further below, chapter 3, note 94.

⁴³ Nawas, "Psychoanalytic View," at 98.

of poisoning him. The later Sunni sources tend to think al-Ma'mūn innocent, doubtless because of the pro-Alid policies he continued to promulgate until his death.⁴⁴

While al-Ma'mūn obviously profited by the deaths of al-Faḍl and al-Riḍā, there is little good evidence that he murdered either of them. In the case of al-Faḍl, a group of the caliph's military advisors had more immediate reason to do so. When al-Riḍā reported that Iraq had lapsed into chaos, the caliph sought confirmation from his advisors, who confessed to the veracity of the report. Al-Faḍl, angered by the revelation of his deceit, vented his wrath on these men, who apparently then plotted his murder as a matter of self-defense.⁴⁵ Apart from this report, there is evidence that al-Faḍl expected trouble. Before setting out for Iraq, he asked al-Ma'mūn to guarantee his safety, and a caliphal letter to this effect has been preserved.⁴⁶ As for al-Riḍā, one of the earliest accounts suggests that, if he was indeed poisoned, the culprit was not al-Ma'mūn but rather the Khurasani general 'Alī b. Hishām, who (the account implies) acted without the caliph's knowledge.⁴⁷ This is a plausible suggestion: the *abnā'* had objected to the designation, and 'Alī b. Hishām, like the other commanders engaged in the battle for Iraq, would have seen the utility, if not the necessity, of eliminating al-Riḍā from the succession.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the evidence for their actually having done so is fragmentary and indirect. Similarly, the question of whether al-Ma'mūn proposed or condoned actions taken by his subordinates against al-Faḍl or al-Riḍā cannot be resolved on the basis of the extant sources.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the possibility that someone other than the caliph had a hand in the suspicious events of 202–203/818 should be granted more attention than it has received so far.⁵⁰

When al-Ma'mūn finally reached Baghdad in 204/819, his return to the capital brought a restoration of order. The counter-caliph Ibrāhīm went into hiding, and the vigilante leader Sahl b. Salāma agreed to "remain indoors." The caliph displayed an interest in the sciences: later sources credit him with supporting the Banū Mūsā's work in astronomy, al-Khwārizmī's composition of the foundational treatise on algebra, and the translation of Greek science and philosophy into Arabic.⁵¹ Al-Ma'mūn's own biographers have almost

⁴⁴ These include a proclamation that none should praise Mu'āwiya (who had wrested the caliphate from 'Alī b. Abī Tālib), a declaration of the superiority of 'Alī to the other Companions, and a proposal to legalize temporary marriage (apparently a *sunna* of 'Alī). See Gabrieli, *Ma'mūn*, 60–62; Sourdél, "Politique," esp. 40–41. Note that Alid-sympathetic does not mean Imami Shiite: see further Sourdél, "Politique," 35; Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, 414; Zaman, *Religion*, 110–12. ⁴⁵ *TRM*, 8: 564–65; Gabrieli, *Ma'mūn*, 55–57.

⁴⁶ Madelung, "New Documents." ⁴⁷ Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II: 550–51. ⁴⁸ See appendix.

⁴⁹ Cf. Madelung, "'Alī al-Rezā," I: 878. ⁵⁰ See appendix.

⁵¹ See Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 339; Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Uyūn*, I: 259; and now Gutas, *Greek Thought*, esp. 53–60, 75–104. *KB* mentions the caliph's expertise in medicine and nutrition (31) and the translations from Persian made during his reign (86). For further references see *ThG*, III: 200–01. His curiosity about the contents of the Egyptian pyramids is described in Maqrīzī, *Mawā'iz*, I: 113–14, citing al-Mas'ūdī's lost *Akhbār al-zamān*. Today, guides describe the opening in the north face of the Pyramid of Cheops as having been made by al-Ma'mūn. See further Stadelmann, *Grossen Pyramiden*, 121–23.

nothing to say about any of this. They do, however, dwell on his practice (apparently begun in Marv) of holding debate-sessions with scholars of various persuasions. He shared with the Mu'tazilī scholars a critical attitude toward the *sunna* (the reported normative practice of the Prophet and the Companions). On occasion, he allegedly defended his caliphate using the Murji'ī argument that those who serve as caliphs are legitimate, evidence of their unworthiness notwithstanding. He obviously had some sympathy for the Imami view that 'Alī and his descendants were legitimate imams, although he did stop short of rejecting Abū Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthmān. The most important creed he espoused, however, was the so-called Jahmī doctrine that the Qur'ān was created by God as opposed to being co-eternal with Him.⁵² Unwilling, perhaps, to provoke a population of Baghdad is still suspicious of him, al-Ma'mūn forbore making public proclamation of this creed until 212/827, and waited another six years to demand adherence to it.⁵³

The fateful moment came in 218/833, the last year of al-Ma'mūn's reign. While on campaign against the Byzantines in Syria, he sent a series of letters to Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm, his deputy in Baghdad, ordering him to question judges and notary-witnesses, and later also Hadīth-scholars and jurists, to confirm their belief in the createdness of the Qur'ān (*khalq al-Qur'ān*). In the letters, the caliph adopts a tone familiar from the "Risālat al-khamīs" and the announcement of al-Riḍā's succession. The caliphs, he says, are the heirs of the prophets and possessors of knowledge (*'ilm*), and must "exert themselves earnestly for God." After study and reflection, he has resolved to act against those "ignoramus" who deny that God created the Qur'ān. Such a denial implies that the Book is co-eternal with God, a heresy the caliph condemns as *tashbīh* ("anthropomorphism"), that is, the assertion of similarity between God and one of His creatures. To make matters worse, the heretics have the temerity to call themselves the *ahl al-sunna wa 'l-jamā'a* – roughly, "the orthodox community" or (from a modern perspective) the "proto-Sunnis."⁵⁴ He condemns their desire for "leadership" (*ri'āsa*), deplores their ascendancy over the common people (*al-'amma*), and threatens them with dire punishments if they do not recant.⁵⁵

Al-Ma'mūn ordered a number of scholars sent to him in al-Raqqā, and carried out their inquisition (*miḥna*) himself. A second group was interrogated

⁵² Specific references will appear below. For an exhaustive account of the schools, see Madelung, *Imam al-Qāsim*; *ThG*, III: 159ff. Van Ess concludes that al-Ma'mūn held Murji'ī and Jahmī views, but was not a Mu'tazilite (*ThG*, III:157).

⁵³ Reportedly he was dissuaded by fear of how the Hadīth-scholar Yazīd b. Harūn (d. 206/821–22) would react (Jad'ān, *Miḥna*, 114–18; *ThG*, III: 177).

⁵⁴ I adopt this term from Zaman, who uses it to designate "those groups of the late 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries which defined their identity in terms of what they saw as their adherence to the Prophet's *sunna*," with an emphasis on Hadīth and the exemplary status of the Prophet and his Companions (*Religion*, 1). For a self-description see *ṬḤ*, 1: 24–36, and below, pp. 107–17.

⁵⁵ *TRM*, 631–44; Tabari, *Reunification*, 199–210. On the *khalq al-Qur'ān*, see Madelung, "Controversy"; Jad'ān, *Miḥna*, 11–44.

by Ishāq in Baghdad. Nearly all of those interrogated eventually submitted (although many later retracted their confessions). The few who had withheld their assent were dispatched to Syria. Before the dissenters could reach him, however, al-Ma'mūn died (218/833), reportedly because he ate fresh dates while bathing in cold water. On his deathbed, he exhorted his heir al-Mu'taṣim to treat the Alids kindly and to continue the Inquisition. Al-Mu'taṣim (r. 218–227/833–842) carried out this testament by overseeing the interrogation and flogging of Ibn Ḥanbal, the only surviving Baghdadi dissident. The next caliph, al-Wāthiq (r. 227–232/842–47), executed the proto-Sunni insurrectionist Aḥmad b. Naṣr al-Khuzā'i. The legacy of al-Ma'mūn ended only with the accession of al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–47/847–61), who lifted the Inquisition, extended caliphal patronage to the proto-Sunnis, and demolished the tomb of the Alid martyr al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.⁵⁶

Although al-Ma'mūn did not live long enough to do more than set the Inquisition in motion, it remains the most controversial episode of his reign. Over a century of modern scholarship has wondered why he persecuted the proto-Sunnis, and why he used the createdness of the Qur'ān as a test of faith. In his pioneering study of 1897, Walter Patton argued that al-Ma'mūn, swayed by Mu'tazilī and Shiite convictions, was endeavoring to impose a “rational” view of the Qur'ān upon the anti-philosophical Ḥadīth-men.⁵⁷ However, as Madelung has shown, the dogma of the uncreated Qur'ān was not part of Shiite doctrine at the time.⁵⁸ According to Fahmī Jad'ān, moreover, Mu'tazilī scholars wielded no particular influence at court, and al-Ma'mūn himself was hardly a dogmatic proponent of their views.⁵⁹ Given these findings, more than one scholar appears to have concluded that the createdness doctrine was simply a convenient weapon against the *ahl al-sunna*.⁶⁰ To arrive at a more satisfactory explanation, it will be necessary to survey what students of the Inquisition have discovered about the political affiliations of the men interrogated, and more broadly about the nature of the relationship between the scholars and the state. These matters constitute essential background not only for the study of al-Ma'mūn but also for that of Ibn Ḥanbal (ch. 4) and Bishr al-Ḥāfi (ch. 5).

In his study of the early caliphate, Nagel depicts the Abbasid dynasty as having promised to rule according to the *sunna*, that is, with the legal findings of the *ʿulamā'*. Al-Ma'mūn broke from this model by claiming the right to pass judgement on “all questions,” including but not limited to matters of faith. As *imām al-hudā*, he set himself the task of reconciling the differences among Muslims. This impulse explains his designation of al-Riḍā as heir apparent as well as his fondness for hosting debates among representatives of different sects. In Nagel's view, the Inquisition marks the failure of this utopian policy

⁵⁶ On the phasing out of the *miḥna*, see Hinds, “Miḥna.”

⁵⁷ Patton, *Ahmed Ibn Hanbal*; and further Sourdel, “Politique.”

⁵⁸ Madelung, *Imam al-Qāsim*, 66; also *ThG*, III: 447. ⁵⁹ Jad'ān, *Miḥna*, 47–109.

⁶⁰ E.g., Nawas, “Ma'mūn,” 60–62; see further below.

of reconciliation. The *ahl al-sunna*, who had their own notions of religious authority, had no intention of bowing to the caliph's. Many of them, moreover, espoused generalized anti-Abbasid views, and had ties to long-standing opposition movements. Faced with their recalcitrance, the caliph resolved to impose his rights as imam by force.⁶¹

In their study of the same period, Crone and Hinds agree that al-Ma'mūn took his responsibilities as *imām al-hudā* seriously. However, they dispute Nagel's contention that the early Abbasid caliphate ever declared itself faithful to the *sunna* as defined by the scholars. Rather, they argue, the caliphate had since its inception made a claim to exclusive and absolute religious authority. In calling himself *imām al-hudā*, al-Ma'mūn was merely reasserting that authority. During the early Abbasid period, the jurists had become more assertive about the independent validity of their legal judgements. In response, al-Ma'mūn resolved to settle the issue by declaring the Qur'ān created and daring the jurists to challenge his judgement. With the "restoration of Sunnism" under al-Mutawakkil, the issue was resolved to the benefit of the scholars. Crone and Hinds thus conclude (following Gibb and Lapidus) that the failure of the Inquisition marks the permanent separation of religious and political authority in Islam.⁶²

Crone and Hinds' conclusions have been challenged by Muhammad Qasim Zaman, who argues that the relation between the scholars and the state was, both before and after the *miḥna*, one of cooperation, not conflict. The early Abbasid caliphs patronized proto-Sunni scholars, who in turn lent legitimacy to the regime. This state of affairs necessarily entailed mutual recognition. While conceding that many scholars, proto-Sunni and otherwise, held aloof from or even fought against the state, he argues that caliphs and scholars commonly acknowledged one another as competent to deliver legal judgements. The Inquisition, according to Zaman, represents a short-lived aberration from this pattern. He does not offer a specific explanation for al-Ma'mūn's policy toward the proto-Sunnis, nor for the role of the createdness-doctrine in that policy. He does, however, argue that the religious authority the caliph claimed was not categorically different from that ascribed to Abbasid caliphs before and after him. Thus, "if there ever was a divorce of religion and the state, it did not occur in, nor was it the product of, the early Abbasid times."⁶³

Al-Ma'mūn's understanding of himself as *imām al-hudā* may have been an innovation, as Nagel suggests, or it may have been a conscious revival of long-standing caliphal claims, as Crone and Hinds would have it. Either way, the caliph's hostility to the proto-Sunnis is plausible. But the specific events of the Inquisition demand further explanation. Crone and Hinds treat the *ahl al-sunna* as independent-minded jurists, as some of them doubtless were. But the men interrogated during the Inquisition were preponderantly either

⁶¹ Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, esp. 116–54, 430–46.

⁶² Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*; for antecedents see Tyan, *Califat*, 439–73; Gibb, "Government"; and Lapidus, "Separation." ⁶³ Zaman, *Religion*; citation on p. 213.

state-appointed judges, or teachers of Ḥadīth.⁶⁴ Regarding the former, there is little evidence that they ever tried to contradict al-Ma'mūn's rulings before the Inquisition.⁶⁵ Moreover, it is not clear whether their doing so would have posed an immediate threat to the caliphate. In practice as well as in theory, the caliph could depose his judges at will, or summarily reverse their rulings.⁶⁶ As for the Ḥadīth-men, there is little indication that those interrogated were active *fuqahā'*. Quite the contrary: Ibn Ḥanbal, the most prominent Baghdadi dissident, rejected the use of *ra'y* and *qiyās* and reportedly declared al-Shāfi'i's foundational treatise on jurisprudence unworthy of being copied out.⁶⁷ According to Crone and Hinds, these distinctions do not matter: the mere existence of legal authority independent of the caliphate constituted an intolerable act of defiance.⁶⁸ Yet the fact remains that the two largest categories of victims – judges and Ḥadīth-men – had little in common. The former were state appointees, while many of the latter shunned any involvement with the state. Finally, a few of the men interrogated – most prominently Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī, the former counter-caliph – had no significant reputation in Ḥadīth or *fiqh*.

The most promising explanation for the diversity of the interrogees emerges from an investigation of their sectarian and political affiliations. Enough work has been done on this topic to inspire Nawas to complain that “the sheer number of factions and groups is burdensome: Ḥanbalites, proto-Ḥanbalites, the *Abnā'*, Khurasani loyalist fighters, vigilantes, Abbasids, Hashimites, Persian elements, 'Alids, Shi'ites, Kharijites, Murji'ites, and of course Arabs and non-Arabs of recent and remote Khurasani ancestry.”⁶⁹ He could have added the neo-Umayyads (or Sufyānids), the Ḥarbīya, the *hashwīya*, the *nābita* (or *nawābit*), the Sunnis (or proto-Sunnis) and the *mushabbīha*. Yet it is clear even from these lists that many of the names refer to the same groups. For example, *mushabbīha*, *nawābit*, and *hashwīya* are all terms of abuse for the scholars of Ḥadīth, many of whom were associates of Ibn Ḥanbal. In fact, it is possible to sort out most of these groups, and to establish the threat they posed, or were thought to pose, to al-Ma'mūn.

Most broadly, al-Ma'mūn feared two kinds of enemies. The first kind consisted of men who espoused interpretive doctrines different from or inimical to his own. The second consisted of groups known to have taken up arms against the Abbasid caliphate generally or his caliphate specifically, or likely to do so in the future. Part of the reason for the proliferation of associations decried by Nawas is that the caliph and his contemporaries treated both sets of opponents as essentially identical. As it happens, this impression often

⁶⁴ See Nawas, “The *Mihna* of 218,” and further below.

⁶⁵ In Jahshiyārī, *Wuzarā'*, 315–16, a judge refuses to accept his command to recognize testimony from a witness. The judge is dragged away and deposed (cf. immediately below).

⁶⁶ See Tyan, *Organisation judiciaire*, I: 139–57 and 176–82; Coulson, *History*, 122–24; and Coulson, “Doctrine.” For an example from al-Ma'mūn's reign, see, e.g., Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II: 571–72, where the Caliph not only reverses a verdict but has the offending judge punished.

⁶⁷ *TH*, I: 31 and 57; see further ch. 4.

⁶⁸ Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 91–93.

⁶⁹ Nawas, “The *Mihna* of 218,” 707.

proved correct. The first man interrogated in the *miḥna*, the Syrian Ḥadīth-scholar Abū Mus'hir al-Ghassānī (d. 218/833), not only denied the createdness of the Qur'ān but also had a history of revolutionary association. In 195/810–11, when the Umayyad known as al-Sufyānī led Damascus in rebellion against al-Amīn, Abū Mus'hir had served the rebel in the capacity of judge. He may well have done so under duress. Even so, al-Ma'mūn reportedly held the appointment against him and mentioned it derisively during his interrogation. Threatened with decapitation, Abū Mus'hir did confess that the Qur'ān was created. Still suspicious, al-Ma'mūn nevertheless ordered him to be sent to Baghdad, where he died in prison.⁷⁰

In their studies of the Inquisition, Nagel, Jad'ān and van Ess have unearthed similar connections between the interrogees and opponents of the Abbasids in general or of al-Ma'mūn in particular.⁷¹ Inevitably, the political opposition appears in conjunction with seemingly contingent dogmatic differences. Al-Ma'mūn's interest in Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī, for example, seems straightforward enough on political grounds. Ibrāhīm had been elected caliph by the Baghdādīs when they disavowed al-Ma'mūn, and had gone into hiding when the latter returned to the capital. The troops who fought for him consisted of *abnā'*, that is, descendants of the first Abbasid revolutionaries, now commonly called "the troops of al-Harbīya" after their quarter in Baghdad.⁷² Also on Ibrāhīm's side were the *'ayyārūn*, the "hooligans" who had fought for al-Amīn during the civil war. Ibrāhīm himself was eventually captured and pardoned. In 210/825, however, several men, among them *'ayyārūn*, were arrested on charges of conspiring to restore him. The danger of another such uprising seems sufficient cause for al-Ma'mūn to keep an eye on Ibrāhīm, especially if he suspected that the *abnā'*, who prided themselves on their ability to "topple dynasties," would rise again on behalf of the counter-caliph.⁷³ But here too we find a doctrinal dimension. Ibrāhīm, it turns out, took a dim view of al-Ma'mūn's Alid sympathies. During his brief counter-caliphate, moreover, he had demanded the repentance of Bishr al-Marīṣī (d. 218/833), a prominent advocate of the *khalq al-Qur'ān*.⁷⁴ Ibrāhīm himself was no scholar, but it seems that anti-Alid and anti-Jahmī sentiments went hand in hand with opposition to al-Ma'mūn.⁷⁵ It is therefore plausible that al-Ma'mūn would assume the converse was true: that is, anyone espousing anti-Alid and anti-Jahmī sentiments was opposed to him.

⁷⁰ *KB*, 153; *TB*, XI: 72–75 (no. 5750); *SAN*, X: 233–38; Jad'ān, *Miḥna*, 132–37; Madelung, "The Sufyānī"; *ThG*, III: 452–53.

⁷¹ Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, 430–46; *ThG*, III: 446–81; Jad'ān, *Miḥna*, 189–263.

⁷² On the *abnā'* see Jāhīz, *Manāqib*, 25–28; Ayalon, "Military Reforms," 4–12; Crone, "'Abbāsīd Abnā'," with a discussion of the Harbīya on p. 10.

⁷³ On the *abnā'*, see above, pp. 25–26, 28; Ibrāhīm was also accused of being popular only because food prices had been low during his reign; see Al-Qāḍī, "Earliest Nābita," 39–40.

⁷⁴ *TB*, XII: 459–60 (in the entry for Qutayba b. Ziyād, no. 6941); *ThG*, III: 173–77.

⁷⁵ Hanbal, *Dhikr*, 79 (Ibrāhīm's *miḥna*); Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, 439–40 (with a further connection between Ibrāhīm and the Sufyānī movement); Al-Qāḍī, "Earliest Nābita," 39–40, esp. note 41; *ThG*, III: 449–51.

This is precisely the purport of al-Ma'mūn's denunciation of the *ahl al-sunna*, who were most emphatically anti-Alid and anti-Jahmī. Of course, there was more to their self-definition than that. Most prominently, they were devoted to Ḥadīth, and eschewed theological speculation. Accordingly, they were literalists: hence the derogatory terms *mushabbiha* (anthropomorphists) and *hashwīya* (roughly, "know-nothings") applied to them by the caliph and his supporters.⁷⁶ Moreover, their leaders were conspicuously scrupulous, and shunned the court (see further ch. 4). Some of them also claimed the right to enforce the *ḥudūd* (penalties for wine-drinking, fornication, and the like) on their own initiative.⁷⁷ This was the meaning of their call to "enjoin the good and forbid evil." Admittedly, the most prominent vigilante leader, Sahl b. Salāma, eventually submitted to caliphal authority. Moreover, his supporters fought against, not with, other anti-Ma'mūnid elements such as the *'ayyārūn*.⁷⁸ Therefore, we cannot assume that all those who opposed the Abbasids were necessarily in collusion. Yet the diversity of the group al-Ma'mūn called in for interrogation, and the clear links between some of them and one or another of the opposition movements, lend weight to Jad'ān's conclusion that the Inquisition was a sweeping gesture of political repression carried out under the guise of a doctrinal dispute.⁷⁹

Even so, Jad'ān goes too far, I think, in separating the doctrinal from the political. As Nagel's account makes clear, *tashbīh*, the praise of 'Uthmān, and *al-amr bi 'l-ma'rūf* were not merely pretexts to crack down on dissent. Rather, they were inseparable from the nature of the dissent, and threatening in themselves. Whatever the actual composition of anti-regime sentiment, the Abbasids and their apologists saw their opponents as dangerous primarily because of their "ignorance." Among other things, "ignorance" meant unwillingness to agree with the caliph that God is unlike any of His creatures, that 'Alī was superior to 'Uthmān, and that only the caliph could punish fornicators and wine-bibbers. Indeed, it was precisely because of such "irrational" beliefs that a man might await the millennial return of al-Sufyānī, or tie a Qur'ān around his neck and join the vigilantes. As a rhetorical trope, certainly, the insistence on the seditious and heretical ignorance of the common people and their leaders is ubiquitous in the state-sympathetic sources. Al-Ma'mūn's first Inquisition letter speaks of "the great mass of ignorant subjects and the rabble of the common people" who "have no capacity for reflection, insight, or reasoning from God's proof and guidance."⁸⁰ A similar attitude is evident

⁷⁶ The Hanbalīs were aware of the opprobrious label *mushabbiha*, and protested against it (*TH*, I: 35). ⁷⁷ See further Crone, *Slaves*, 252 n. 521.

⁷⁸ Lapidus, "Separation," argues for a connection between the vigilante movement and later Hanbalī opposition to the caliphate. Madelung, "Sahl b. Salāma," argues rather that the Hanbalī Sunnis drew their support from the groups Sahl had fought against. Sahl was associated with at least one prominent proto-Sunnī, the rebel al-Khuza'i; however, we are also told that Ibn Hanbal disapproved of his activities (*ThG*, III: 174 and 471).

⁷⁹ Jad'ān, *Mihna*, 267–90.

⁸⁰ On al-Ma'mūn's language here, see Steppat, "From 'Ahd Ardašīr."

in al-Jāḥiẓ' treatment of the proto-Sunnis, whom he calls the *nābīta*. These *nābīta* are anthropomorphists and predestinarians; they refuse to curse Mu'āwiya;⁸¹ they are vulgar, ignorant, and heretical; they command a large popular following; and al-Jāḥiẓ is afraid of them.⁸²

The caliph and his apologists may have been mistaken in conflating all the dissidents they mention into an undifferentiated mass of vulgar malcontents. However, the historical record tends to support their impression that those who deplored the caliph's religious opinions could command substantial popular support. There are, for example, accounts of a crowd that gathered outside al-Mu'taṣim's palace on the day Ibn Ḥanbal was flogged. Reportedly, too, Ibn Ḥanbal was later approached by a group of men who had planned a coup against al-Wāthiq. As for proto-Sunni willingness to carry out an armed uprising, we can adduce the abortive revolt against al-Wāthiq by Aḥmad b. Naṣr al-Khuzā'ī, who enjoyed popular veneration after his death.⁸³ Moreover, as Lapidus has suggested, the proto-Sunnis commanded substantial support from the Khurasanis in Baghdad. The vigilante-leader Sahl b. Salāma, the dissident scholar Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, and the insurrectionist al-Khuzā'ī were all descendants of Khurasani *abnā'*. Although al-Ma'mūn did not live to witness al-Khuzā'ī's uprising, he evidently suspected trouble from the scholar's compatriots: when the caliph proposed a public cursing of Mu'āwiya, he was reportedly dissuaded for fear of a violent response by the "Khurasanis." It is not clear whether he meant the *ahl al-summa* of Khurasani origin, or the Ḥarbīya (that is, the *abnā'* who were still armed and dangerous), or some combination of these. But the point is clear: proto-Sunni Khurasanis disapproved of his policies, and were capable of defying him with force.⁸⁴

Where does this leave the judges, who presumably had little interest in stirring up popular resentment against the regime? From the Inquisition-letters, it seems that al-Ma'mūn suspected them not of plotting against him, but rather of failing to enforce his declaration that the Qur'ān was created. In practice, this probably meant that they certified notary-witnesses (*ūdūl*) without questioning them about their views on the Qur'ān.⁸⁵ This is the best explanation for the first letter, which despite its broad-ranging denunciations, encharges the governor of Baghdad with a limited task. He is to ascertain that all those in state employ, in particular the judges, and by extension the

⁸¹ Cursing Mu'āwiya, who had wrested the caliphate from 'Alī, indicated that one was a philo-Alid, while defending him was a characteristic practice of the proto-Sunnis.

⁸² Al-Qādī, "Earliest Nābīta," 42ff. Al-Qādī refrains from identifying al-Jāḥiẓ's *nābīta* with the *ahl al-hadīth* or the *ahl al-summa*, but documents (p. 43, note 61) the common view (with which I agree) that these groups were essentially the same.

⁸³ On Ibn Ḥanbal, see ch. 4 below; on al-Khuzā'ī, who had also participated in Sahl b. Salāma's movement, see Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, 464; Jad'ān, *Miḥna*, 167–73; *ThG*, III: 465–73.

⁸⁴ Lapidus, "Separation"; Madelung, "Sahl b. Salāma"; *ThG*, III: 447–49. Nawas ("The *Miḥna* of 218") has disputed the Khurasani connection on the grounds that many of those interrogated in the *miḥna* were from elsewhere. But Lapidus, Madelung, Nagel, and van Ess nowhere claim that Khurasanis were the *only* ones opposed to the *miḥna*-caliphs – quite the contrary.

⁸⁵ On the *ūdūl* see Tyan, *Organisation judiciaire*, I: 349–72; Coulson, *History*, 146.

notary-witnesses whom they appoint, are of right belief. Only when this procedure provoked unexpected resistance did al-Ma'mūn broaden the scope of the Inquisition to include Ḥadīth-scholars and jurists generally. The results of this new round of interrogations evidently confirmed his suspicions of the "dangerous ignorance" prevalent among men revered by the *ʿamma*. By its end, the Inquisition had grown into a mechanism for rooting out "heresy," and by extension sedition, wherever they might be found.

As Nagel and van Ess have emphasized, a conspicuous target of the Inquisition was *tashbīh*, "anthropomorphism."⁸⁶ Indeed, had al-Ma'mūn wished for a pretext to haul in as many dissidents as possible, he could hardly have done better than to choose *tashbīh*. However, the status of the Qur'ān was not the only, nor even the most prominent, point of contention between the caliph and the so-called *mushabbih*a. At least equally important were the "anthropomorphist" assertions that God had spoken to Moses (*taklīm*), and that the blessed would see God in Paradise (*ru'yā*).⁸⁷ Why did al-Ma'mūn not use one of these assertions as a pretext to call the Inquisition? The reason is simple: all "anthropomorphist" views, with one exception, have direct support in the Qur'ān or the Ḥadīth. The exception is the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān, which can only be asserted or refuted by syllogistic argument.⁸⁸ Had al-Ma'mūn insisted on an allegorical interpretation of *taklīm* and *ru'yā*, he would have been forced to argue against the plain sense of the relevant scriptural passages. With the *khalq al-Qur'ān*, however, he could make his case on purely logical grounds, with the assurance that here, at least, his opponents would not have the resources to reply in kind.⁸⁹ The proto-Sunnis did eventually scrape together a refutation, but only in the wake of the Inquisition (see ch. 4). Their triumph over the Inquisition did not come about because they had a good argument for the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān.⁹⁰ Nor, despite some clever legends to the contrary, did they argue successfully that the Abbasids had no right to enforce a doctrine the Prophet himself had seen fit to ignore.⁹¹ Rather, they triumphed because their principled resistance to state coercion had substantial popular support, just as al-Ma'mūn had feared.

Al-Ma'mūn and his biographers

A reign as complex and controverted as al-Ma'mūn's posed a challenge to his biographers.⁹² Their responses can be divided into several historical stages.

⁸⁶ Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, 439ff; *ThG*, III: 449, 459, 464, 467, 473.

⁸⁷ For these and other anthropomorphic views, see Ibn Ḥanbal, *Radd*, 33–44; *ṬH*; I: 29, 31.

⁸⁸ This has been pointed out most recently by Nawas (*Ma'mūn*, 61), who nonetheless later confesses himself "in the dark as to why al-Ma'mūn's choice fell on it rather than on any other issue" (*ibid.*, 75). ⁸⁹ Cf. Crone, *Slaves*, 258, n. 608.

⁹⁰ *Kalām*-arguments were indeed offered by some proto-Sunnis (see van Ess, "Ibn Kullāb"), but it is unclear whether they had any effect on caliphal policy.

⁹¹ On these legends, see *ThG*, III: 502–08.

⁹² The works or sections of works treated here as biographical (see ch. 1) are *KB*, *passim*; *TRM*, VIII: 650–66; *MDh*, IV: 4–46; *TB*, X: 181–89 (no. 5330); *TMD*, XXXIX: 222–93; Ibn al-ʿImrānī, *Inbāʾ*, 96–103; *SAN*, X: 272–318; Suyūṭī, *Taʾrīkh al-khulafāʾ*, 283–340.

The first, embodied in the work of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr, reflects the impressions of the caliph's contemporaries and of the generation immediately following. Their reports concede his judicial, military, and even interpretive authority. At the same time, they evince a sustained interest in episodes that reveal the limits of that authority, which they in effect portray as that of a king, not a rightly guiding imam. A shift in emphasis occurs in al-Tabarī's biography of al-Ma'mūn, which upholds his judicial and military authority but implicitly denies his interpretive power and indeed his claim to knowledge. The sixth/twelfth century marks another shift. The compilers of this period grant al-Ma'mūn *ʿilm*, but define this knowledge as identical to that of the Ḥadīth-scholars. This misrepresentation survived into the final stage, that of the Mamluk-period biographers. Even so, the biographers of this period were able to restore a sense of al-Ma'mūn as an Alid-sympathetic and intellectually adventurous caliph, a combination of which they vigorously disapproved.

Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's Kitāb Baghdād

The surviving portions of the *Kitāb Baghdād* by Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (d. 280/893) cover only a limited period: from the caliph's return to Baghdad (204/819) to his death at the front (218/833). Even in its incomplete form, however, the work offers a lively counterpoint to the terse synopses of the annals. Ibn Abī Ṭāhir is certainly aware of al-Ma'mūn's claims to religious authority, and includes several reports that seem designed to defend it. Yet most of the narrators cited in the *Kitāb Baghdād* evince little interest in depicting al-Ma'mūn as a successful *imām al-hudā*. More commonly, they depict him as a king (*malik*) remarkably adept at handling challenges to his authority.

Upon returning to Baghdad, al-Ma'mūn faced the hostility of an Abbasid court that blamed him for the siege of the city, the death of al-Amīn, and the appointment of an Alid heir apparent. According to Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's sources, al-Ma'mūn did not defend himself in the grandiose language of the "Risālat al-khamīs". Rather, he embarked on a program of conciliation based on clemency and displays of remorse. First, he let Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn persuade him to drop the green uniforms and banners adopted at al-Riḍā's accession ceremony, and return to the Abbasid black.⁹³ Then, he pardoned al-Faḍl b. al-Rabīʿ, who had advised al-Amīn during the civil war. According to the *Kitāb Baghdād*, al-Ma'mūn confessed that, as a child, he had been afraid of the vizier, who would not return his greetings. But when he saw his old enemy reduced to a menial position in the banquet hall, he resolved to show his gratitude to God by forgiving him.⁹⁴ Finally and most famously, he pardoned the counter-caliph, Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī, who had gone into hiding and was later captured, despite having disguised himself as a woman. Such clemency was doubtless an attribute of the *imām al-hudā*. Yet Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's sources do not depict it that way. Rather, they suggest that the caliph's willingness to forgive

⁹³ KB, 1–2. ⁹⁴ KB, 5–11.

arose from his desire to conciliate his family. According to one report, he felt such remorse over his brother's death that he burst into tears at the sight of Ṭāhir, the general who had commanded the siege of Baghdad. He was also stung by a poem of reproach commissioned by al-Amīn's mother Zubayda, and granted her a generous stipend.⁹⁵ Other appeals to family feeling were equally successful. According to one report, he threatened to punish the counter-caliph's mother if she did not reveal her son's whereabouts; but when she wrote back describing herself as al-Ma'mūn's mother as well as Ibrāhīm's, al-Ma'mūn relented and did not press her. When Ibrāhīm was later captured, al-Ma'mūn forgave him and restored his estates.⁹⁶

Besides al-Ma'mūn's clemency (*'afw*), the *Kitāb Baghdād* stresses his justice (*'adl*) and his forbearance (*hilm*). These, too, are imamic virtues, but the *Kitāb Baghdād* treats them rather differently. Most often, the caliph displays them when the effrontery of his petitioners leaves him no choice. Riding one day through al-Ruṣāfa, for example, he was accosted by a man who shouted out accusations against one of his entourage. Embarrassed, al-Ma'mūn rode away, then turned on the offender to demand that he compensate the man. According to another report, he was presiding at the grievance-court (*majlis al-maẓālīm*) when he recognized a Christian who had shouted at him on the road. Despite being caned as a punishment for his effrontery, the Christian said that he would continue to demand satisfaction. Al-Ma'mūn then relented and granted his request.⁹⁷ In several instances, al-Ma'mūn's forbearance serves as the pretext for a comical story hardly commensurate with the dignity of an *imām al-hudā*. One day, for example, a visitor found the caliph calling for a towel to wipe a piece of burned food from his hand:

The servants could all hear him, but none responded. Infuriated, I went out to find them. I found some rolling dice, others playing chess, and others setting up cockfights. I said, "You bastards, don't you hear the Commander of the Believers calling you?" One said, "Just one more throw"; another said, "Let me finish this move"; and another said, "Go on ahead and I'll follow you." I got so angry I lost track of what they were saying to me, and as I was reviling their mothers, I heard al-Ma'mūn calling me. I went back to him and found him laughing. "Go easy on them," he said, "they're people, just as you are."

"What," I said, "and let you lick your hand clean?"

He asked if that was how I treated my servants. I replied that if my son, not to mention my servants, neglected me that way, I would kill him. He said, "That is how the common people would react; but our manners are the manners of kings." I retorted, "[Your] manners are beyond those of kings, or even prophets, for that matter."⁹⁸

As his visitor's comment implies, al-Ma'mūn's attributes included kingship as well as heirship to the prophets. Like the caliph in this story, however, the *Kitāb Baghdād* emphasizes the kingly rather than the caliphal. This attitude is

⁹⁵ *KB*, 16; 12 (cf. 163–64).

⁹⁶ *KB*, 100–03, 128.

⁹⁷ *KB*, 55–56.

⁹⁸ *KB*, 51–52.

evident even in treatments of the quintessentially imamic attribute of knowledge. According to Yaḥyā b. Aktham, his chief judge, al-Ma'mūn possessed exemplary knowledge of medicine, astrology, *fiqh*, and Ḥadīth. Yet the caliph recites no Ḥadīth in the *Kitāb Baghdād*, and nods off during a lesson in *fiqh*.⁹⁹ On one occasion, admittedly, he displayed virtuosity in *kalām* by persuading an apostate to return to Islam.¹⁰⁰ Much more conspicuous, however, are his attainments in poetry, music, and science. According to Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's sources, al-Ma'mūn could recite verses appropriate to any occasion, from chess matches to executions.¹⁰¹ He displayed an expert's appreciation of music and called for particular passages to be played again and again.¹⁰² At a banquet, he described the medicinal and nutritive properties of over three hundred dishes.¹⁰³ On another occasion, he demonstrated that air has mass by filling a glass vessel with water and noting that the water did not enter the spout when he blocked the end of it with his finger.¹⁰⁴ Al-Ma'mūn's expertise in all these matters may have been impressive and valuable, but it consists of *adab* (literary training) and *ḥikma* (philosophical rationalism) rather than imamic *ilm*.

Ibn Abī Ṭāhir was certainly aware of al-Ma'mūn's religious and political aspirations. Indeed, the *Kitāb Baghdād* is one of the two sources to preserve his Inquisition-letters. However, it contains little evidence that his contemporaries were persuaded of the success of his endeavors. According to Yaḥyā b. Aktham, al-Ma'mūn convoked his debate-sessions in order to guide the community towards his own views on the imamate. On one occasion, he confided that he favored 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib over his own ancestor al-'Abbās. At the same time, he rejected the extreme claims of the Imamīs, arguing that one can prefer 'Alī without condemning the other Companions.¹⁰⁵ Later, however, he adopted a harsher line and announced his intention to proclaim the public cursing of Mu'āwiya.¹⁰⁶ Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's sources thus offer little reason to suppose that al-Ma'mūn was perceived as steering the community in the right direction. Regarding the cursing of Mu'āwiya, for example, we are told that a succession of advisors eventually persuaded the caliph that such a policy would be unwise.

As Nagel points out, al-Ma'mūn sought to restore the unity of the community through debate, but reacted poorly when the parties failed to submit to his judgement.¹⁰⁷ The most obvious illustration of this pattern is the Inquisition, and here, at least, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir appears to have endeavored to cast al-Ma'mūn's policies in the best possible light. The biographer's partisanship is evident from his account of the caliph's meeting with the Syrian Ḥadīth-scholar Abū Mus'hīr al-Ghassānī. According to Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's report, al-Ma'mūn asked the scholar to assent to the createdness of the Qur'ān, which he did. The report does not mention that Abū Mus'hīr had to

⁹⁹ KB, 34–35. On al-Ma'mūn's knowledge of *fiqh*, see below, p. 53. ¹⁰⁰ KB, 32–33.

¹⁰¹ KB, 99, 125, 159ff. ¹⁰² KB, 104–05, 178–83. ¹⁰³ KB, 31. ¹⁰⁴ KB, 95.

¹⁰⁵ KB, 40–44. ¹⁰⁶ KB, 50. ¹⁰⁷ Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, 136–54; 400–10.

be threatened with decapitation, and was later sent to prison where he died. Moreover, it alleges that he could not answer the caliph's questions about the Prophet's practice. It therefore implies that he was a fraud, and that al-Ma'mūn was right to persecute him.¹⁰⁸

Oddly enough, this is the only report in the *Kitāb Baghdād* of a meeting between al-Ma'mūn and a Ḥadīth-scholar. Even so, the caliph's hostility toward the proto-Sunnis, or more exactly their presumed hostility to him, comes through all the same. In his first Inquisition-letter, al-Ma'mūn mentions that two groups are responsible for spreading the pernicious doctrine of the uncreated Qur'ān. The first group consists of those who call themselves Sunnis. The second consists of "adherents of the false way, who display submissiveness to someone other than God and who lead an ascetic life – but for another cause and not the true faith."¹⁰⁹ These false ascetics have "agreed with [the Sunnis] and joined them in advocating their noxious opinions . . . in order to carve out positions of leadership (*ri'āsa*) and moral authority." According to a dubious story in the *Kitāb Baghdād*, al-Ma'mūn had occasion to debate with one of these zealots himself. Fortunately, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir preserves not only the story but the apparently genuine report that served as the basis for it.

The genuine report resembles the many accounts of obstreperous plaintiffs who appear at the *maẓālim*. It relates that a commoner (*raǧul min al-sūqa*) was pestering a member of the elite (*min al-ʿuẓamāʾ*) for repayment of a debt. The notable struck the commoner, who cried out that justice had died with ʿUmar (b. al-Khaṭṭāb, the second caliph). Both men were brought before al-Ma'mūn. Upon hearing that the commoner came from the town of Fāmiya, he pointed out that ʿUmar had given the Muslims permission to sell the natives of that region as slaves. He then gave the commoner a thousand dirhams and sent him away.¹¹⁰ In the elaborated version, described as another memory of the same event, the commoner is now an ascetic (*zāhid*) who shouts "O ʿUmar!" as he passes the caliph's palace. Al-Ma'mūn overhears him, orders him brought inside, and asks him the reason for his outburst. The ascetic replies that the palace reminded him "of the ruins of the Caesars and the edifices of tyrants." The governor Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm advises flogging the man or beheading him, but al-Ma'mūn cannily remarks that the zealous ascetic is hoping for just such a punishment. The caliph instead engages the ascetic in debate, forcing him to admit that he does not object to elaborate buildings generally, or to seeing the caliph reside in a pre-existing palace. Rather, he objects only to the expenditure of public funds on new buildings. Al-Ma'mūn replies that the palace, which is the only building he will construct, serves the useful purpose of intimidating foreign potentates. He then addresses the matter of ʿUmar, saying that the second caliph led a noble people who had seen their Prophet with their own eyes. Now, however, the community consists of "people from places like

¹⁰⁸ *KB*, 153; cf. *TRM*, VIII: 643, *SAN*, X: 233–38; Jadʿān, *Mihna*, index; *ThG*, III: 452–53.

¹⁰⁹ *Ahlu ʿl-samti ʿl-kādhibi, wa ʿl-takhashshu ʿl-li-ghayr Allāh, wa ʿl-taqashshufi li-ghayri ʿl-dīn* (*KB*, 185 = *TRM*, VIII: 632, Ṭabari, *Reunification*, 202). ¹¹⁰ *KB*, 38–39.

Bazūfar, Fāmiya, and Dastmīsān, who when they go hungry, eat you; when they are satisfied, overwhelm you; and when they rule you, enslave you.” The implication is that harsh rule is permissible, even necessary, in a way it was not in the past. Al-Ma'mūn then gives the zealot a gift and sends him on his way, warning him that he might not be so forbearing the next time.¹¹¹

Where did this spurious ascetic come from? As a topos, the caliph-denouncing zealot antedates al-Ma'mūn. In his *ʿUyūn al-akhbār*, Ibn Qutayba includes several tales in which preachers berate a series of caliphs, among them al-Manšūr.¹¹² Another precedent is the story reported by Ya'qūbī according to which al-Fuḍayl b. ʿIyāḍ dissuaded al-Rashīd from using torture to regain embezzled funds.¹¹³ In all these cases, however, it is the caliph who is persuaded, not the zealot. Al-Ma'mūn's story, though it displays some of the topoi common to other renditions (e.g., the caliphal advisor who suggests killing the ascetic), contains a novel element: the caliph argues with his challenger and defeats him. This novelty may reflect transmitters' memories of a historical event, namely, al-Ma'mūn's encounter with Sahl b. Salāma, one of the leaders of the Baghdad vigilante movement. During the second phase of the civil war, Sahl explicitly challenged the authority of al-Ma'mūn's representatives, proclaiming that he would “fight anyone who contravenes the Book and the *sunna*, whoever it might be, from the government or otherwise.” The people of West Baghdad rallied to his call to “enjoin the good and forbid evil,” building towers of bricks and weapons, topped with copies of the Qurʾān, to signal their allegiance. Captured and later released by the counter-caliph Ibrāhīm, Sahl persisted in his activities until al-Ma'mūn reached Baghdad. Then, al-Ṭabarī tells us, the vigilante leader was taken to see the caliph, who gave him a gift but commanded him “to sit at home.”¹¹⁴ A zealot eventually reconciled to al-Ma'mūn, Sahl may have served as the inspiration for stories about dissident ascetics who confront the caliph and then depart the palace chastened but unharmed.

As Madelung and van Ess have shown, relations between the vigilantes and the proto-Sunnis were not always good.¹¹⁵ Even so, the success of the vigilante movement evidently predisposed al-Ma'mūn to be suspicious of those who invoked *al-amr bi 'l-ma'rūf*, a group associated (in the other zealot-stories, at least) with the ascetics. In the writings of the caliph's younger contemporary and client al-Jāhīz (d. 255/869), we find evidence to suggest that such suspicions were well founded. In his epistle against *tashbīh*, al-Jāhīz numbers among the opponents of Mu'tazilism certain zealots who equate virtue with poverty. He quotes them as arguing that “virtue, leadership, reputation, and nobility of character are proportional to roughness of skin, shabbiness of dress, frequency of fasting, and a preference for solitary rambling.” With his usual cleverness, al-Jāhīz objects that, if this claim were true, the ascetic Companions of

¹¹¹ *KB*, 39–40. ¹¹² Ibn Qutayba, *ʿUyūn*, II: 359–70.

¹¹³ Ya'qūbī, *Ta'riḥ*, II: 501. ¹¹⁴ *TRM*, VIII: 552; 572–73; see further *ThG*, III: 173–75.

¹¹⁵ See above, n. 78.

the Prophet would have succeeded as caliphs instead of Abū Bakr and 'Uthmān.¹¹⁶ This argument would certainly have appealed to al-Ma'mūn: it makes the caliphs, not the ascetics, the true heirs of the Prophet.

Apart from its possible allusion to Sahl, the narrative transformation of a commoner into an ascetic zealot reflects another preoccupation common to al-Ma'mūn, al-Jāhīz, and the *akhbārīs*: the notion of collusion between the proto-Sunnis and the "common people." In the Inquisition letters, the caliph accuses the proto-Sunnis of seeking leadership among the common people, who he presumes are identical with the dregs of society.¹¹⁷ In his epistle on *tashbīh*, al-Jāhīz is more precise, quoting Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā' to the effect that popular support for anthropomorphism comes from plasterers, weavers, boatmen, goldsmiths, and the like.¹¹⁸ Tradesmen and skilled laborers like these should have been distinct, even in al-Ma'mūn's mind, from the *siflat al-ʿamma*, a term more usually applied to the "street vendors, naked ones, people from the prisons, riffraff, rabble, cutpurses, and people of the market" who had fought for al-Amīn.¹¹⁹ Indeed, it is the small property owners, not the "dregs of society," whom Madelung identifies as probable partisans of Sahl b. Salāma.¹²⁰ Later, some proprietors may also have rallied around the proto-Sunnis: the crowd that gathered in disapproval of Ibn Ḥanbal's trial was reportedly composed of people who "closed up their shops and armed themselves" before converging on the palace.¹²¹ It is perhaps noteworthy in this context that some of the early proto-Sunni ascetics are identified as being shopkeepers, or having connections with them.¹²² Al-Jāhīz, who unlike al-Ma'mūn lived to witness the flogging of Ibn Ḥanbal, may therefore have had good reason to identify proto-Sunni "heresy" with tradesmen and shopkeepers rather than the "dregs of society."

As Wadād al-Qādī has shown, al-Jāhīz's attitudes toward "popular heresy" (i.e., proto-Sunnism) partake of surprise, contempt, anger, fear, and a certain degree of self-criticism.¹²³ For the most part, the narrators of the *Kitāb Baghdad* are more restrained, depicting the common people as petitioners rather than seditious heretics. Even so, sentiments like the ones al-Jāhīz expresses in his epistle and al-Ma'mūn in his Inquisition-letters surface from time to time. One particularly revealing report states that when the caliph announced his intention to decree public cursing of Mu'āwiya, Yahyā b.

¹¹⁶ Jāhīz, *Rasā'il*, I: 301.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Rudé on the fallacy of the "criminal mob" (*Crowd in History*, 198ff.).

¹¹⁸ Jāhīz, *Rasā'il*, I: 283.

¹¹⁹ *TRM* VIII: 448 (Tabarī, *War*, 139; cited in Crone, "'Abbāsīd Abnā,'" 18); Hoffmann, "Pöbel," 35. On the distinction between the *ʿaḡyārūn* and the more respectable classes, see Hoffmann, "Pöbel," 40; *ThG*, III: 106. ¹²⁰ Madelung, "Sahl b. Salāma," 336.

¹²¹ This is the (admittedly unreliable) account of Ibn al-Faraj (*HA*, IX: 204–5); see further below, pp. 131–34.

¹²² The family of Ma'rūf al-Karkhī (d. 200/815–16) sold flour (*TB* XIII: 206; no. 7177); al-Sarī al-Saqāṭī (d. 251/865) owned a shop (*TB* IX: 187; no. 4769); Bin 'Āmir, "Al-Sarī," 191; and Bishr b. al-Ḥārith encouraged an associate to "stick to the market" (*HA*, VIII: 340).

¹²³ Al-Qādī, "Earliest Nābita," 43ff.

Aktham objected that the common people and particularly the Khurasanis (that is, the Baghdadis of Khurasani origin) would not stand for it. The caliph then consulted his trusted companion, the *adīb* and theological dabbler Thumāma b. Ashras (d. 213/859),¹²⁴ who elaborated on Yaḥyā's assessment. The *ʿamma*, he claimed, are easily led. "If you sent them a black-clad man with a stick in his hand, he would lead 20,000 of them to you." This apparent allusion to the Abbasid revolution seems to mean that the people would as soon fight against the caliph as for him. Thumāma then adduced a Qur'ānic verse comparing the people to livestock (25: 46). Finally, he recounted a recent experience of his. One day he saw a man selling medicines in the street:

He was calling out: "Cures for albugo, cataracts, glaucoma, dimsightedness, and myopia!" Meanwhile one of his eyes was lusterless and the other had a poultice [?] on it. But the people had gathered around him and were surging forward asking him to prescribe for them. I dismounted, plunged into the crowd, and called out: "Hey you! You look as if you need your eyes treated more than anyone else does! You say this medicine cures complaints of the eye. Why don't you use it yourself?"

He said, "I've been here for ten years and I've never seen a bigger idiot than you."

"How's that?"

"Where do you think my eye problem started?"

"I don't know."

"In Egypt!"

The crowd converged on me, saying, "He's right! You're an idiot!" They looked as if they meant to harm me, so I said, "By God, I did not realize that his eye problem started in Egypt!" And it was only by this subterfuge that I escaped them.¹²⁵

Amused, the caliph agreed with Thumāma that the *ʿamma* are easily duped. But what neither man mentioned is that Thumāma acquiesced in the scam because he feared the violence of the crowd. The commoners, gullible or not, posed a real threat – or at least the caliph and his courtiers imagined that they did. Again, their suspicion may have been well-founded. When during the counter-caliphate of Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī Bishr al-Marīsī was tried at the Ruṣāfa mosque, apparently on charges of advocating the *khalq al-Qur'ān*, the people (*al-nās*) are described as gathering to lynch him.¹²⁶

In his response to the 'Umar-invoking zealot, al-Ma'mūn made no reference to his rightly guided imamate. Rather, he invoked the memory of the Prophet, the practice of 'Umar, and the necessities of state. This self-presentation is in keeping with the general tone of the reports in the *Kitāb Baghdād*, which treats the caliph's power only as it manifests itself in response to particular challenges. The theoretical basis for al-Ma'mūn's imamate, and the legitimacy of his claims to interpretive authority, do not appear as subjects of particular interest to Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's informants. From the Inquisition-letters, and from the scattered references to popular discontent, we can surmise that these issues were a matter of concern in some quarters. Indeed, to the extent

¹²⁴ *ThG*, III: 159–72, esp. 163 n. 54. ¹²⁵ *KB*, 50–51.

¹²⁶ *TB*, 12: 459–60 (in the entry for Qutayba b. Ziyād, no. 6941); *ThG*, III: 176–77.

that al-Ma'mūn's contemporaries supported his imamate, it appears that they did so because they shared his fear of "vulgar proto-Sunni heresy." For Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, however, this concern did not prompt a sustained defense of al-Ma'mūn's *imāmat al-hudā*. The biographer's reticence on the matter does not mean that he meant to subvert his subject's authority as caliph. On the contrary: his choice of reports leaves the impression that he was rather taken with al-Ma'mūn. If the reports are any guide, the caliph's associates thought of him as a quick-witted, fair-minded, and enterprising leader, temperamental but quick to forgive. His status as heir of the Prophet and *imām al-hudā* doubtless hovered as the unspoken background to "that singular property that makes command efficacious," as Durkheim felicitously defined power.¹²⁷ However, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's sources found little to report for or against the proposition that al-Ma'mūn really was an heir of the Prophet and a rightly guided imam.

Al-Ṭabarī's sīra-section

If Ibn Abī Ṭāhir is noncommittal about al-Ma'mūn's imamate, al-Ṭabarī appears positively dismissive. Of the twenty-one reports in his *sīra*-section, seventeen tell of al-Ma'mūn's expertise in poetry, or recount verses spoken by him, about him, or for him. In one case, he discerns flaws in a poem that even the poet did not see. In another, he completes the second half of each line of an elegy before the poet can.¹²⁸ The nature of these anecdotes may reflect al-Ṭabarī's inability to find a place for them in the annalistic section of his work. Because they are mostly undated, and generally have little to do with particular battles or appointments, they could only be dumped in the *sīra*-section. But of all the stories he could have selected (he evidently had the *Kitāb Baghdad* available) al-Ṭabarī chose these. The most plausible explanation for this editorial policy is that it constitutes an indirect commentary on al-Ma'mūn's claim to the imamate. As al-Ṭabarī knew from the Inquisition-letters, al-Ma'mūn laid claim to interpretive authority, an attribute that demanded *ilm*. The anecdotes in the *sīra*-section convey that he did have knowledge, but not of Qur'ān, Ḥadīth, or *fiqh*. Rather, his *ilm* consisted in a good ear for verse. This may be a laudable attribute in a king, but hardly redounds to the credit of a self-proclaimed *imām al-hudā*.

Al-Ṭabarī's implicit criticism does not mean that he deemed al-Ma'mūn an illegitimate caliph. The historian lived intermittently in Baghdad during the Samarran anarchy and the second siege (251/865), took up continuous residence there at the beginning of the Abbasid revival under al-Muwaffaq, and lived to witness and write about the decline that set in under al-Muqtadir. Having experienced the civil disorders that befell Baghdad at the hands of slave troops and mercenary armies, al-Ṭabarī can hardly be blamed for supporting, however tacitly, a strong state authority.¹²⁹ In his Qur'ānic commen-

¹²⁷ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 370.

¹²⁸ *TRM*, VIII: 657–58.

¹²⁹ See, e.g., *TRM* VIII: 551.

tary, he interprets verses 3: 26 and 4: 59 to mean that obedience is due to the ruler, whoever he may be.¹³⁰ Strikingly, however, he refers throughout the discussion not to caliphs or imams but to the *sultān* or “ruler,” the vaguest term possible. Similarly, he named his *Ta'rikh* “the history of prophets and kings,” not “prophets and caliphs.” Like Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, al-Ṭabarī appears to have deemed al-Ma'mūn a king rather than an imam.

Al-Mas'ūdī's Murūj

The entry on al-Ma'mūn in al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj* lacks the focus of the *Kitāb Baghdād* or al-Ṭabarī's *sīra*-section. It wanders into anecdotal byways of all sorts, returns periodically to the caliph, then rambles off again into the doings of poets, buffoons, and parasites. Even so, it offers unique testimony about al-Ma'mūn's character and reign. Al-Mas'ūdī was a Shiite who nevertheless acknowledged the legitimacy of the Abbasids (but not the Umayyads).¹³¹ Although al-Ma'mūn in his opinion could not have been an *imām al-hudā*, he was still a king, and a good one at that. To begin with, the civil war was not his fault. While al-Ṭabarī (in his annals) depicts a gradual deterioration of relations abetted by advisors on both sides, al-Mas'ūdī uses dramatic anecdotes to pin the blame squarely on al-Amīn. In these anecdotes, al-Amīn deliberately violates the Mecca protocol, then plays drunkenly in a fish-pond as the catapults level Baghdad. Nor could al-Ma'mūn have prevented the war, which was a matter of fate. To support this contention, al-Mas'ūdī adduces reports in which the caliphs al-Manṣūr and al-Rashīd predict the catastrophe.

In one of these reports, al-Rashīd watches his sons recite their lessons, and tearfully confesses that they will one day come to blows. Asked how he knows this, he adduces “an irrefutable sign passed on to the knowers, by the trustees, from the prophets.”¹³² This notion of inheritance through the “trustees” (*awṣiyā'*) reflects the Abbasid claim, apparently modeled on Shiite descriptions of 'Alī, that the Prophet made al-'Abbās his trustee.¹³³ Another passage ascribes precognition to the caliph al-Manṣūr, though without the reference to heirship.¹³⁴ In the chapter devoted to al-Ma'mūn his stepmother Zubayda addresses him as “heir to the knowledge of the first ones.”¹³⁵ From these passages, one might conclude that the early Abbasid caliphs claimed an inherited *'ilm* that included precognition. However, the prediction-stories cannot serve as reliable evidence for this conclusion. Evident fabrications designed to justify al-Ma'mūn's rebellion against al-Amīn,¹³⁶ they suggest that caliphal

¹³⁰ Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, VIII: 490–504.

¹³¹ On al-Mas'ūdī's Shiism, see *MDh*, II: 29, where he mentions a (lost) biography he wrote of the Ṭālibīs and the Imams; and further Pellat, “Mas'ūdī”; Shboul, *Mas'ūdī*, 59; Khalidī, *Islamic Historiography*, 133 (argues that he accepted the Abbasids as caliphs but not as imams).

¹³² *MDh*, III: 361.

¹³³ Tyan, *Califat*, 314–15 (includes an example of al-Rashīd being addressed as “the son of the Imams . . . and the trustees”); see further Zaman, *Religion*, 122.

¹³⁴ *MDh*, III: 404. ¹³⁵ *MDh*, III: 424. ¹³⁶ See El-Hibri, “Regicide.”

ilm was a plausible narrative device, but not an effective component of Abbasid legitimacy. Certainly al-Mas'ūdī did not believe that the caliphs could know the future. In one report he cites, al-Rashīd agonizes over the decision as to which of his sons to appoint as successor; in another, a casual observer perceives what al-Rashīd does not: namely, that dividing the empire is a bad idea.¹³⁷

Particularly instructive in this respect is al-Mas'ūdī's version of the zealot-story. In the *Kitāb Baghdād*, as we have seen, an ascetic appears to harangue al-Ma'mūn. In the *Murūj*, the zealot returns with more fanfare. The narrator of this version is Yaḥyā b. Aktham, the caliph's chief judge. According to Yaḥyā, al-Ma'mūn was presiding over the Tuesday dinner for scholarly guests when a stranger "in coarse whites with his trousers rolled up" gained admittance. This "Sufi" asked the caliph whether his authority was based on the consent of the community or merely on his power to command obedience. Al-Ma'mūn replied that it was neither. Rather, he was caliph because the previous ruler had appointed him to the post. He admitted that those who tendered their oaths of allegiance to him may have done so unwillingly. Nevertheless, he implied, there is no other standard by which to declare a person caliph. He then launched into a vaguely worded and self-defensive narrative of his reign. The rule fell to him, he said, when his brother "took the path he took." He then sought to abdicate in favor of "an acceptable leader," an allusion to al-Riḍā. But when civil war broke out again, he had no choice but to reclaim the rule.

After delivering this *apologia pro vita sua*, al-Ma'mūn charged the Sufi to pass his words on to the community, and to keep an eye out for a likely replacement. "You, my man, are my messenger to the community of Muslims. When they have agreed upon someone acceptable to them, I will defer to him in this matter of the rulership."¹³⁸ Satisfied, the Sufi took his leave. The caliph then dispatched an agent to follow him. Later, the agent returned to report that the Sufi had gone into a mosque where "fifteen men like him in dress and appearance" asked about his interview with the caliph. The Sufi had related the speech, and his colleagues had signaled their approval of it. After listening to the spy's report, al-Ma'mūn remarked to Yaḥyā that one little speech had spared them the trouble of dealing with "those people." Yaḥyā replied, "Praise to the God who inspires you, Commander of the Believers, with the right and the proper in word and deed."¹³⁹

The caliph's speech to the Sufi contains no reference to a rightly guided imamate, only to a sort of trial-and-error meritocracy. Given the failure of his policies, it is perhaps understandable that al-Ma'mūn would avoid any reference to his imamate. Rather, he argues merely that he is doing a better job than his predecessors. But if this is the point of the report, the story's coda undermines it. Unlike Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's lone zealot, the Sufi represents a group of

¹³⁷ *MDh*, III: 362–63; III: 364.

¹³⁸ *MDh*, IV: 19–21.

¹³⁹ *MDh*, IV: 20–21.

potential revolutionaries. To avoid “trouble,” al-Ma'mūn gives him an answer that will satisfy him. But the answer appears in the end to have been insincere. In the final exchange between Yaḥyā and the caliph, both men appear to consider the latter an *imām al-hudā* whom God inspires with knowledge of the right thing to do. This ironizing epilogue may be a later addition to a story intended as an apologia for al-Ma'mūn. As it stands, however, the story depicts him as a crafty king rather than a trustworthy imam, and a far cry from the caliph of the “Risālat al-khamīs”.

One point, nevertheless, tells in al-Ma'mūn's favor: he did follow ostensibly meritocratic principles when he appointed 'Alī al-Riḍā, “the acceptable one,” to succeed him. The designation of an Alid heir may explain al-Mas'ūdī's partiality to the caliph. In his account of the episode, the biographer notes al-Ma'mūn's kindness to al-Riḍā, who, he writes, died of a surfeit, or possibly by poison. But he says nothing to suggest that, if al-Riḍā was poisoned, al-Ma'mūn was responsible.¹⁴⁰ In another part of the book, he even gives al-Ma'mūn a chance to explain his motives for the designation. One day, he reports, the caliph al-Rāḍī (r. 322–29/934–40) asked why his ancestor al-Ma'mūn had “gone from black to green and back to black again,” an allusion to the Riḍā-episode. The court *akhbārī* Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī (d. 335/946) replied by relating a conversation between al-Ma'mūn and Zubayda. Al-Ma'mūn entered Baghdad still wearing the green he had adopted at al-Riḍā's accession. When Zubayda remonstrated with him, he divulged the real reason for his loyalty to the Alids. Of all the Rāshidūn, only 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib appointed members of the Abbasid family to positions of power. The Abbasids were thus in debt to the Alids, a debt which he had tried to repay by appointing al-Riḍā as his heir apparent.¹⁴¹ This explanation, genuine or otherwise,¹⁴² is compatible with al-Ma'mūn's reported project of reconciling the estranged factions in the Muslim community. It is equally plausible as a fabrication, with the purpose of proving that the caliph was not an Imami Shi'ite (which was a good or a bad thing, depending on the audience). In any case, it does depict the caliph as acting in good faith.

Al-Mas'ūdī's tolerant affection for the caliph is nowhere more evident than in the description of his death. An earlier source, al-Tabarī's chronicle, relates that al-Ma'mūn and two companions ate fresh dates while dangling their feet in cold water. As a result, they all developed fever, and al-Ma'mūn died. Displaying his typical interest in documents, al-Tabarī concludes by citing the caliph's last will and testament.¹⁴³ Al-Mas'ūdī's report, on the other hand, is a masterpiece of dramatic narration. While at the front, al-Ma'mūn offered a reward to anyone who could bring him a fish he had spotted in a pool. A

¹⁴⁰ *MDh*, IV: 27–28; cf. IV: 5.

¹⁴¹ Al-Ṣūlī appends a poem in which al-Ma'mūn expresses amazement at the Abbasid neglect of the Alids (*MDh*, IV: 334–35; cf. Gabrieli, *Ma'mūn*, 34).

¹⁴² Ibn Abī Ṭāhir credits Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn, not Zubayda, with persuading the caliph to return to black (*KB*, 1–2). ¹⁴³ *TRM*, VIII: 646–50.

servant eventually succeeded in retrieving the fish, but splashed the caliph with cold water in the process. By the time the fish had been prepared, al-Ma'mūn was too ill to eat it. When the physicians despaired of him, he asked to look out at his army. "He was taken out into the night and given a view of the tents and the troops, spread out in all their multitudes with the campfires blazing. He said, 'O You whose kingdom shall not perish, have mercy on one whose kingdom has perished.'" He was returned to his bed, with an attendant ready to help him recite the profession of faith. When the time came, the attendant pronounced the words for him in a loud voice. The physician Ibn Masawayh commented that the caliph was too ill to distinguish between God and Mani. "At that, al-Ma'mūn opened his eyes in grandeur and rage, with a furious dignity never before seen, and reached out to strike at Ibn Māsawayh. He tried to address him, but could not. He cast his tearfilled eyes to the heavens, and his voice suddenly returned. He said: 'O You Who do not die, have mercy on this mortal.' The next moment he was gone." Al-Ma'mūn is evidently a good Muslim: he dies on the battlefield, with his hand lifted to strike the irreverent Christian physician. He is also a king: in his last moments, it is the end of his kingship (*mulk*) that he mourns. The fish, as Biancamaria Scarcia-Amoretti has pointed out in another context, is an old Iranian symbol for kingship.¹⁴⁴ Here, al-Ma'mūn's vain pursuit of it causes his demise.

Despite their differences, the biographies of al-Ma'mūn compiled by Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, al-Tabarī, and al-Mas'ūdī appear equally indifferent to the caliph's claims to rightly guided leadership of the community. Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's sources treat him as an impressively learned and clement king, but not as an *imām al-hudā* (although they do cite his statements to that effect in the Inquisition-letters). Al-Ṭabarī appears eager to add that, whatever al-Ma'mūn's virtues may have been, they did not extend to *ilm*, at least not of the imamic variety. For his part, al-Mas'ūdī evinces fond regard for the caliph's Alid sympathies. He also preserves evidence that the Abbasid claim to *ilm* clung to existence as a literary trope. But neither the biographer nor his sources appear to take the claim very seriously. Their indifference to the caliph's imamate does not mean that the biographers believed him to be a bad or illegitimate ruler. On the contrary, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir and al-Mas'ūdī in particular display a lively appreciation of him, albeit for different reasons. Even so, their treatment of him differs from the treatment biographers of other *īā'ifas* accorded their subjects. Instead of emphasizing his claim to the prophetic legacy, they depict him as less of an heir than he claimed to be.

The Sunni revival of al-Ma'mūn

Two centuries after al-Mas'ūdī, al-Ma'mūn's image changes in an unexpected direction. For the first time in the extant tradition, he is represented as a

¹⁴⁴ Scarcia Amoretti, "Interpretazione."

scholar of Ḥadīth and a defender of the *sunna*. The change begins in the *Ta'rikh Baghdād* of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071) and reaches maturity in the *Ta'rikh Dimashq* of Ibn 'Asākir (d. 571/1175). A third work, the *Inbā'* of Ibn al-'Imrānī (d. 580/1184–1185), takes al-Ma'mūn's part so enthusiastically that it grants him, at long last, the attributes of a rightly guiding imam. To defend him, the Sunni biographers occlude his most distinctive attributes: his Shiite and Jahmī convictions and the policies that they inspired. The designation of al-Riḍā, for example, is mentioned only in passing. The Inquisition, similarly, vanishes from his biographies, surviving only in the vitae of its victims.¹⁴⁵ Most surprisingly, an ever-increasing number of reports depict the caliph as an enthusiastic student of Ḥadīth.

The evidence for Sunni revisionism hardly means that the historical caliph had no exposure to Ḥadīth.¹⁴⁶ Al-Ya'qūbī reports that al-Rashīd sent him to study with Ḥadīth-scholars and jurists,¹⁴⁷ and al-Khaṭīb notes that al-Qāsim b. Salām wrote a book on difficult Ḥadīth for him.¹⁴⁸ It is perhaps therefore all the more significant that his known writings nowhere cite Ḥadīth. His letter of designation for al-Riḍā cites a *sunna* of 'Umar, but the "Risālat al-khamīs" and the Inquisition-letters cite no *sunan* at all.¹⁴⁹ Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, al-Mas'ūdī, and al-Tabarī nowhere depict him as reciting Ḥadīth, even where one might expect him to: in his message to the Byzantines, for example, or in his last testament.¹⁵⁰ Meanwhile, other references suggest that he maintained a critical distance from Ḥadīth. He reportedly "excelled in *fiqh* according to the *madhhab* of Abū Ḥanīfa," precisely the *madhhab* least committed to Ḥadīth.¹⁵¹ In the *Kitāb Baghdād*, he refers in the same breath to "the speech of His prophets and their heirs" (*kalāma anbiyā'i 'l-lāhi wa-warathati rusulihi*), a phrase that makes caliphal speech as authoritative as the Prophet's.¹⁵² In a Twelver Shiite source, we find him arguing that the only way to distinguish true reports from false is by analysis of their contents (not their *isnāds*). He then uses the method to prove the imamate of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.¹⁵³ Although the report is dubious, the opinions it attributes to the caliph are plausible enough: as the *imam al-hudā*, he is qualified to interpret the *sunna* in a way the scholars are not, and without recourse to Ḥadīth (which he nevertheless appears to know very well).

¹⁴⁵ See, e.g., al-Khaṭīb's entry on 'Abd al-A'lā Abū Mus'hīr al-Ghassānī (*TB*, XI: 72–75; no. 5750). Ibn 'Asākir does mention the *khalq* controversy, but only in a comical story about a poet (*TMD*, XXXIX: 279). Although he says nothing about al-Riḍā, the biographer does deal briefly with al-Ma'mūn's Alid sympathies. He quotes him to the effect that 'Alī is good, but the other Companions are not, therefore, bad (XXXIX: 232, cf. 238–39).

¹⁴⁶ The case for caliphal Ḥadīth-expertise is persuasively made in Zaman, *Religion*, esp. 125.

¹⁴⁷ Al-Ma'mūn was a quick study but al-Amīn was not (Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II: 501; Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II: 65).

¹⁴⁸ *TB*, XII: 405 (no. 6868); cited in Zaman, *Religion*, 157. The book, or perhaps another like it, seems rather to have been written for Ṭāhir b. al-Husayn (*TB*, XII: 403); in any case it was ridiculed by some of the *ahl al-hadīth* (see *ibid.*, XII: 405, 410).

¹⁴⁹ Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 136 (translation), 95 (discussion).

¹⁵⁰ *TRM* VIII: 629–30, 647–50; *KB*, 156.

¹⁵¹ Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nuḡūm*, II: 225; cited in Hinds, "Miḥna." ¹⁵² *KB*, 32–33.

¹⁵³ *UAR*, II: 185–200 (see further ch. 3).

Despite the caliph's attested reservations about Ḥadīth and his hostility to its adherents, his Sunni biographers were determined to rehabilitate him for Sunnism, which they did by depicting him as a Ḥadīth-scholar. In al-Khaṭīb's *Ta'rikh*, Yaḥyā b. Aktham relates that he was sleeping at the palace and got thirsty in the middle of the night. The caliph rose and brought him a cup of water. When Yaḥyā protested, al-Ma'mūn recited: "Al-Rashīd related to me, from al-Mahdī, from al-Manṣūr, from his father, from 'Ikrima, from Abū al-'Abbās, from Jarīr, from 'Abd Allāh: 'I heard the Prophet, may God bless and save him, say: 'The lord of a people is their servant.'"¹⁵⁴ This report, as it happens, is plausible enough: the caliph's Ḥadīth is an Abbasid one, that is, a report whose *isnād* contains the names of his ancestors. Crone and Hinds have suggested that the caliphs' fondness for such reports signals an attempt to assert familial privilege as interpreters of the *sunna* as against the claims of the increasingly powerful Ḥadīth-scholars and jurists.¹⁵⁵ Zaman on the other hand argues that the Abbasid caliphs recited Ḥadīth to emphasize their membership in the scholarly community, not their position outside it. Even so, Abbasid *isnāds*, he suggests, did have a polemical undertone: they undercut the Imami Shiite notion of privileged transmission from 'Alī.¹⁵⁶ Zaman's account seems the more appropriate for the Abbasids in general, while Crone and Hinds' makes better sense for al-Ma'mūn (whom even Zaman admits to be an exceptional case).

In Ibn 'Asākir's *Ta'rikh*, al-Ma'mūn's Ḥadīth-activity expands, and his reports are no longer Abbasid in provenance. The *Ta'rikh* lists the caliph's teachers and those who related on his authority, just as it does for ordinary transmitters. A series of reports then shows him reciting Ḥadīth from the pulpit, at the battlefield, and even at the racetrack.¹⁵⁷ The most remarkable account is one in which he plays (convincingly, it seems) at being a Ḥadīth-scholar. The narrator is again Yaḥyā b. Aktham:

One day, al-Ma'mūn said to me: "Yaḥyā, I want to recite Ḥadīth!" I said: "Who better than you, Commander of the Believers?" He said: "Set up a pulpit for me on the concourse." He then alighted and related Ḥadīth. The first report he recited was on the authority of Hushaym, from Abū al-Jahm, from al-Zuhrī, from Abū Salama, from Abū Hurayra, from the Prophet: "Imru' l-Qays is the standard-bearer of the poets on their way to Hell." He went on to recite some thirty Ḥadīth. When he descended, he said, "What did you think of our lecture, Yaḥyā?"

"Most noble, Commander of the Believers. The elite and the common people alike gained understanding."

"Bah! I find nothing attractive in [being with] you. The real lectures belong to those dressed in rags and carrying inkwells."¹⁵⁸

This report may reflect the memory of a short-lived caliphal impulse. Yet it seems too conveniently constructed to serve the purposes of Sunnis eager to

¹⁵⁴ *TB*, X: 185 (no. 5330).

¹⁵⁵ Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 84, and note 1; also 92–93.

¹⁵⁶ Zaman, *Religion*, 120–35.

¹⁵⁷ *TMD*, XXXIX: 223–25, 235–36, 240.

¹⁵⁸ *TMD*, XXXIX: 234–35.

rehabilitate al-Ma'mūn's reputation while preserving their privilege as the bearers of Ḥadīth. The choice of texts is odd: the caliph's first Ḥadīth (and the only one quoted) lashes out at the poets. Perhaps it is too much to see this report as a calculated response to al-Tabarī's portrayal of al-Ma'mūn as a poetry addict. Yet the caliph's citation of an anti-poetry Ḥadīth amounts to a condemnation of many of his companions and indeed of his own way of life, at least as portrayed in the antecedent biographical tradition. The element of self-abasement becomes even more conspicuous when the caliph descends from the pulpit and compares himself unfavorably to his fellow-heirs, the Ḥadīth-scholars.

To corroborate our suspicions about these reports, we must look more closely at their narrator, Yaḥyā b. Aktham (d. 242/857). One of the most vivid and unusual personalities of the period, Yaḥyā began his career as a student of Ḥadīth. His sarcastic backtalk reportedly provoked one of his teachers to remark that he would "do well in the company of you-know-who," meaning the caliphs.¹⁵⁹ Later, he was appointed judge of Basra. When the Basrans accused him of pederasty, he was dismissed from his post. Eventually, however, al-Ma'mūn "recognized Yaḥyā's scholarship and intelligence, and was so impressed with him that he made him chief judge."¹⁶⁰ After a long tenure, Yaḥyā fell from favor in 215/830–31, reportedly because of "his treatment of the people and his pernicious conduct," in particular his misuse of charitable funds.¹⁶¹ We hear nothing more of him during the Inquisition under al-Ma'mūn's successors. With the lifting of the *miḥna* under al-Mutawakkil, he returned to the judgeship in place of the disgraced Ibn Abī Du'ād.

Despite his association with the free-thinking al-Ma'mūn, not to mention his reported stinginess, competitiveness, and mendacity, Yaḥyā cuts a heroic figure in the *Ta'rikh Baghdād*. The reason, it turns out, is that he "was free of heretical innovation, and belonged to the *ahl al-sunna*." No less an authority than Ibn Ḥanbal declares that he never knew Yaḥyā to express a heretical opinion. The reason for this praise appears to be that Yaḥyā once dissuaded al-Ma'mūn from legalizing temporary marriage (a practice apparently endorsed by 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib). "This was a great credit to him, unprecedented in Islam." Evidently impressed, Sunni transmitters also credit him with holding the correct view of the Qur'ān. He reportedly declared that "anyone who says it is created should be asked to repent. If he does not, he is to be beheaded."¹⁶² Given the timing of his fall from grace, Yaḥyā may well have been a victim of the Inquisition, as Jad'ān has suggested.¹⁶³ Certainly the image of a proto-Sunni Yaḥyā finds partial corroboration in earlier sources. Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, who otherwise displays no particular interest in him, credits him with helping to dissuade al-Ma'mūn from cursing Mu'āwiya.¹⁶⁴ Al-Mas'ūdī, who appears equally impartial, includes a story in which Yaḥyā

¹⁵⁹ *TB*, XIV: 197 (no. 7489).

¹⁶⁰ *MDh*, IV: 21–23.

¹⁶¹ *TRM*, VIII: 649.

¹⁶² *TB*, 14: 201–03 (no. 7489).

¹⁶³ Jad'ān, *Miḥna*, 95–98.

¹⁶⁴ *KB*, 50.

argues (against Thumāma b. Ashras and al-Ma'mūn) that the Prophet's Companions are infallible sources of *sunna*.¹⁶⁵

Not all the critics were willing to overlook the doubts about Yahyā's character. Some asserted that he recited Ḥadīth he had copied from books, and two authorities flatly call him a liar. In the end, however, his Sunnism won the day.¹⁶⁶ Whatever his faults of character, they were overlooked in view of his anti-Alid and anti-Jahmī credentials. This *ta'dīl* (declaration of reliability) proved particularly useful for Sunni biographers concerned with al-Ma'mūn's reputation. When they set out to remake the caliph as a Sunni, they appear to have found reports by Yahyā that helped them make their point. A few of the reports (e.g., al-Khaṭīb's, with its Abbasid *isnād*) may be genuine. Ibn 'Asākir's, on the other hand, are too fulsome to be persuasive. For example, the caliph's invidious comparison of opportunist scholars like Yahyā to the ragged men he deems the true scholars of Ḥadīth appears particularly calculated to flatter the sensibilities of the proto-Sunni ascetics – precisely the men whom the historical caliph denounced as frauds, heretics, and rabble-rousers. Yahyā may have fabricated this report to protect his reputation among the *ahl al-ḥadīth*, among whom he had begun his studies, and whose opinions he evidently shared. Alternatively, later Sunni transmitters may have used his name as a convenient peg upon which to hang exculpatory reports about al-Ma'mūn. As an attested Ḥadīth-scholar and proto-Sunni, Yahyā made a convenient narrator – so convenient that compilers were willing to overlook such faults of character as would ordinarily have cast doubt on his veracity. His reports, or reports attributed to him, were granted presumptive reliability by every Sunni biographer after al-Khaṭīb.

Besides the reports in al-Ma'mūn's entries, certain other reports cited in the biographies of his contemporaries contain examples of his purported Ḥadīth-activity. On the face of it, these reports appear to compel credence: as Zaman points out, biographers are unlikely to have adduced such reports to enhance caliphal reputations. Had they wished to achieve this effect, they would have placed the reports in the entries for the caliphs instead.¹⁶⁷ But even if we agree that the stories were adduced to enhance the reputation of the scholars, the result is the same: the stories are still unreliable. This is because the scholars involved, or those who related on their authority, had good reasons of their own to enhance or even fabricate reports of their Ḥadīth-activity at the court of al-Ma'mūn.

The dubious character of these reports may be demonstrated by looking at the two most detailed examples from al-Khaṭīb's *Ta'rikh*. The first states that Sulaymān b. Ḥarb (d. 224/838–39) once stood on a pulpit near the palace gate and recited Ḥadīth to an audience of thousands. The black-clad Abbasid gen-

¹⁶⁵ *MDh*, 4: 8.

¹⁶⁶ A telling example of his rehabilitation: in *KB*, al-Ma'mūn refuses to serve wine to Yāhyā (143); in *TB*, it is Yahyā who refuses to drink it (XIV: 197; no. 7489).

¹⁶⁷ Zaman, *Religion*, 126.

erals gathered at the front, and al-Ma'mūn sat in a room above, looking through a curtain and writing down Ḥadīth.¹⁶⁸ Reading further in the entry, we find that Sulaymān also served as a judge in Mecca. Accepting state appointments inevitably provoked condemnation by proto-Sunni scholars, who described state service as “slaughter without a knife.”¹⁶⁹ The objection probably arose from their knowledge that as magistrates, they were subject to caliphal authority.¹⁷⁰ Because their refusal to serve was tantamount to an attack on the state, it was punished accordingly (i.e., by flogging).¹⁷¹ Being forced to accept a judgeship could mitigate the offense. However, Sulaymān does not appear to have been coerced. While at court, he also came into contact with Ibn Abī Du'ād (d. 240/854), later famous as the Abbasids' chief inquisitor.¹⁷² His biography recounts the meeting in a face-saving story: Ibn Abī Du'ād, with the caliph's approval, tried to outwit him, but Sulaymān shamed him into silence by citing *sunan*. This report, like the one about his reciting Ḥadīth to masses gathered at the palace, is not unlikely in itself (although it is unclear why al-Ma'mūn would put himself to the trouble of trying to hear a Ḥadīth-lecture from an upper-story window). Yet both accounts must be evaluated in light of Sulaymān's evident preoccupation with acquitting himself of the suspicion that attached to judges, and with his awkward position as a Ḥadīth-scholar drawn into the orbit of a heretical caliph. Whether Sulaymān circulated the exculpatory reports in his own defense is unclear. But later Sunni scholars would have had an interest in establishing his orthodoxy: many of the most prominent, including Ibn Ḥanbal, Abū Zur'ā, and al-Bukhārī, recited Ḥadīth on his authority.¹⁷³

The second report of al-Ma'mūn's interest in Ḥadīth appears in the biography of 'Umar b. Ḥabīb (d. 207/822–23). The caliph, we are told, pardoned a condemned prisoner when 'Umar recited an Abbasid Ḥadīth enjoining forgiveness. The caliph then confided to 'Umar that he had fulfilled all his desires except one: to sit on a chair and recite Ḥadīth. But he never would, because Ḥadīth-transmission was incompatible with “caliphal rule and kingship.”¹⁷⁴ Reading further in the report, we find that 'Umar too served as a judge (in Baghdad and Basra). Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of

¹⁶⁸ *TB*, IX: 35 (no. 4622); Zaman, *Religion*, 126.

¹⁶⁹ *TH* I: 174; see further Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh kabīr*, I: 28–48; and Coulson, “Doctrine.” Noteworthy here is the case of the proto-Sunni Ḥadīth-scholar Sharīk b. 'Abd Allāh (d. 177/793–94), who served as a judge. Significantly, his biography relates a long story about his fearless punishment of an agent of al-Rashīd's mother, al-Khayzurān (*TB* IX: 288–90; no. 4838).

¹⁷⁰ See references in n. 66 above, especially Coulson, “Doctrine.” Another reason for aversion to the judgeship was evidently “the hesitation to pronounce with certainty the correct rule of law and the danger of the wrong application of the law in individual cases” (Coulson, “Doctrine,” 223).

¹⁷¹ As reportedly happened to Abū Ḥanīfa: (*TB* XIII: 327–29 (no. 7297)), though the story is probably apocryphal. For other examples see Coulson, “Doctrine,” 211–13.

¹⁷² *ThG*, III: 481–502. ¹⁷³ *TB*, IX: 37, 34 (no. 4622).

¹⁷⁴ *TB*, XI: 198–99 (no. 5903); Zaman, *Religion*, 120.

authorities condemn him as unreliable. As if in response, his biography contains reports that appear calculated to make both himself and his patrons seem devoted to the *sunna*.¹⁷⁵ Some of the stories feature al-Rashīd, and are at least plausible; but the one about al-Ma'mūn is not. In it, 'Umar describes himself as the youngest of the Basran delegation present. By the time of al-Ma'mūn's accession, however, 'Umar had already been a judge for nearly forty years. He also states that al-Ma'mūn was so impressed with him that he appointed him judge in Basra – a position he already held at the time this incident allegedly took place. The best explanation for these anomalies is that 'Umar placed himself, or had a sympathetic transmitter place him, in a story originally told about another caliph. Indeed, there exists another version in which the caliph is named as al-Manṣūr.¹⁷⁶

Despite its inclusion of these dubious reports, al-Khaṭīb's *Ta'rīkh* also contains what seems to be a more believable depiction of al-Ma'mūn's attitude toward the *sunna* and its representatives. This depiction turns up in al-Khaṭīb's biography of Abū Nu'aym al-Faḍl b. Dukayn (d. 218/833 or 219/834), who though a Zaydī was rehabilitated for the *ahl al-sunna* because of his resistance to the Inquisition.¹⁷⁷ The episode it describes took place as the vigilante movement in Baghdad was coming to an end. Al-Ma'mūn had forbidden *al-amr bi 'l-ma'rūf* because "the people had agreed upon an imam," presumably meaning Sahl b. Salāma, and were punishing and imprisoning offenders on their own authority. When al-Faḍl rebuked a soldier for fondling a woman, he was dragged before the caliph on charges of forbidding evil. Al-Ma'mūn commanded him to perform his ablutions and pray. Al-Faḍl washed "according to what al-Thawrī related of 'Abd Khayr's Ḥadīth of 'Alī," and prayed in the manner "ascribed to 'Ammār b. Yasar." Having observed all this, al-Ma'mūn then posed him a series of difficult problems in inheritance-calculation. When he responded to all of them correctly, al-Ma'mūn said: "Who would [dare] forbid the likes of you from enjoining the good? My prohibition applied only to a group who have taken evil for good."¹⁷⁸ This report can be read as another zealot-story, told this time from the zealot's point of view. Al-Ma'mūn has forbidden *al-amr bi 'l-ma'rūf*, a prohibition that casts grave suspicion on his commitment to the *sunna*. But as al-Faḍl discovers, the caliph knows the *sunna* very well, and respects those who display a command of it.¹⁷⁹ Perhaps, too, al-Faḍl's application of a Ḥadīth of 'Alī allowed the caliph to recognize that his prisoner was a fellow Alid-sympathizer. In that case, his leniency amounts to a declaration that the true Sunnis are those who acknowledge the primacy of Ali, as opposed to the notoriously anti-Alid "rabble" who call themselves the *ahl al-sunna*.

¹⁷⁵ *TB*, XI: 197–98 (no. 5903). ¹⁷⁶ Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II: 71–2, note 8.

¹⁷⁷ Madelung, *Imam al-Qāsim*, 79 and n. 231.

¹⁷⁸ *TB*, XIII: 350 (no. 6787; I thank Christopher Melchert for this reference).

¹⁷⁹ On al-Ma'mūn's reverence for the Prophet (not quite the same as a command of *sunna*, but a start), see *KB* 40, 148–49 (= *TRM* VIII: 62).

Despite the caliph's rehabilitation as a Ḥadīth-scholar in the historically Sunni sense, the biographical tradition did not entirely forget the antagonism that existed between him and the ascetic zealots. Indeed, with his new Ḥadīth-credentials, the caliph as imagined in the sixth/twelfth century could defend himself even more effectively than he could in the days of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir. The version of the zealot-tale that appears in the *Ta'riḫ Dimashq* demonstrates this clearly. This version (the fourth so far, counting al-Faḍl b. Dukayn's) describes an incident that supposedly took place on al-Ma'mūn's campaign against the Byzantines in Syria. The caliph was walking outdoors when he was accosted by a man wearing a shroud and covered in embalming fluid. Alarmed, he asked the man whom he was looking for. "I have come for you," said the man. "Why don't you greet me, then?" asked al-Ma'mūn. The man replied that he did not deem it right to greet a ruler responsible for the corruption of the holy war. Rejecting a suggestion that he behead the man, the caliph agreed to debate him. At the debate-session, the shroud-wearer accused the caliph of condoning the sale of wine in the camp, allowing slave women to show their faces, and permitting men and women to consort freely. Al-Ma'mūn replied to the first of these accusations by asking how the ascetic could be sure that the substance for sale is wine if he does not drink it himself. When the shroud-wearer mistakenly identified vinegar, grape-juice, and pomegranate-extract as wine, al-Ma'mūn cried out: "God, I seek your favor by dissuading the likes of this man from commanding the right!" After refuting the zealot's other two accusations, al-Ma'mūn declared:

Shroud-wearer, I can think of three things you might be: in debt, persecuted (*maẓlūm*), or given to over-interpreting (*ta'awwalta fī*) the Ḥadīth of Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī. There the Prophet says in his sermon: 'The best *jihād* is to speak the truth before a tyrant.' You've made me out to be the tyrant – but you are the oppressor here! You have claimed for yourself the position of 'enjoining the good,' and in doing so committed a wrong much more grievous [than doing nothing would have been]. By God, I shall not flog you, or do more than shred your shroud. But may I be cut off from my rightly guided ancestors if I let anyone stand where you're standing right now without proofs to back him up, and if I let him go without flogging him anything less than a thousand strokes and crucifying him on the spot!¹⁸⁰

Like the other Sufi-stories, Ibn 'Asākir's gives us a zealot who seeks out the caliph, boldly challenges him, and loses the argument. However, the arguments here are new. Al-Ma'mūn accuses the shroud-wearer of interpreting Ḥadīth in a self-serving way, and even recites the text his opponent had in mind. This "Ḥadīth of al-Khudrī" echoes (though the caliph does not say so) the Qur'ānic account of how Moses stood up to Pharaoh (Qur'ān 7: 103ff.). Such a challenge evidently called for more than a disingenuous defense of the sort the caliph used against al-Mas'ūdī's Sufi. He accordingly invokes the

¹⁸⁰ TMD, XXXIX: 250–54. The story appears in al-Zubayr b. Bakkār's *Muwaffaqiyāt*, 51–57; cited in Jad'ān, *Mihna*, 256–60. For the Ḥadīth see Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, V: 251, 256.

caliphal succession beginning with the Rāshidūn, continuing through *al-mahdīyūn* (the Abbasids), and currently reposed in himself, alluding thereby to his hereditary legitimacy and his *imāmat al-hudā*. This argument is what one might expect from al-Ma'mūn's "Risālat al-khamīs" and his Inquisition-letters. However, it bears little resemblance to the arguments ascribed to him in the other zealot-tales.

Given its consistency with the letters on the one hand, and its inconsistency with the antecedent biographical tradition on the other, Ibn 'Asākir's report is either an authentic survival or the result of a deliberate process of characterization. Transmitters eager to establish al-Ma'mūn's Sunni credentials either found or concocted a speech for him that reflects his documented attitudes, including his suspicion of the "false ascetics." They appear to have added a Ḥadīth-consciousness entirely absent in his own writings – an element without which al-Ma'mūn would be simply an innovator seduced by *kalām*. This Ḥadīth-element, in turn, explains the longevity of the zealot-character. A story featuring a Ḥadīth-scholar would be uncomfortably reminiscent of what really happened: al-Ma'mūn persecuted the scholars over a point of *kalām*, displaying indifference if not contempt for their knowledge of Prophetic *sunna*. A story featuring a vigilante, on the other hand, was reminiscent of nothing but Sahl b. Salāma's meeting with al-Ma'mūn, which ended happily for the caliph. Moreover, no story could plausibly depict al-Ma'mūn as besting a real scholar on a point of Ḥadīth. But he could easily outwit a nameless ascetic who comes armed with only one proof-text.¹⁸¹

The depiction of the shroud-wearer as a zealot bent on self-righteous denunciation of the caliphate evidently contains elements drawn from reality. Al-Jāhīz appears to have had similar figures in mind when he wrote his epistle against *tashbīh*, and persons matching this description crop up in the annals of the *zuhhād* (see ch. 5). Whether al-Ma'mūn was constantly being accosted by such figures is another matter. Given the recurrence of the topos and its progressive elaboration, it appears rather to have been a convenient device for presenting transmitters' notions (quite different in each case) of al-Ma'mūn's imamate and its implications for his relationship with his fellow heirs. In Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's version, the caliph replies to an unfavorable comparison with 'Umar, and defends his building project by adducing reasons of state. In al-Mas'ūdī's, he argues that he happens to be caliph and is doing a better job than the other candidates. He also offers to resign if a better candidate appears. In al-Khaṭīb's, he defends his prohibition of the *amr bi 'l-ma'ruf wa 'l-nahy 'an al-munkar* on the grounds that the vigilantes have misapplied it. In Ibn 'Asākir's, finally, he again defends the *sunna* against a vigilante, this time alluding to his hereditary Abbasid imamate. In some ways, Ibn 'Asākir's version most closely coincides with al-Ma'mūn's documented description of himself.

¹⁸¹ Such a characterization is plausible: many proto-Sunni ascetics made a point of shunning Ḥadīth-study (see ch. 5).

Yet the resemblance appears more an accidental consequence of Sunni revisionism than the result of faithful historical transmission.

Whatever al-Ma'mūn's attitude toward Ḥadīth may have been, he was not a proto-Sunni Ḥadīth-scholar. Why, then, did his Sunni biographers insist that he was? Although their motives cannot be reconstructed with any certainty, it is still possible to outline the circumstances that may have predisposed them to take such a generous view of him. The most conspicuous such circumstance is the caliphate's new status as the symbol of an embattled Sunnism. Soon after his accession in 232/847, al-Mutawakkil lifted the Inquisition and declared *al-sunna wa 'l-jamā'a* the explicit creed of the regime. In subsequent generations, as the caliphate struggled against a variety of external threats, the Baghdad Sunnis, notably the Ḥanbalīs, rallied noisily around the Abbasids.¹⁸² Al-Ma'mūn's early Sunni biographers were not Ḥanbalīs, but shared their conviction that the Abbasid regime was legitimate. Al-Ṭabarī, as we have seen, stressed the necessity of obedience to the authorities. At the same time, he had his reservations about individual caliphs, including al-Ma'mūn. In al-Ṭabarī's day, critical distance was possible because caliphal authority was still theoretically absolute. Apart from the fate of particular caliphs, the institution was evidently strong enough to bear the blame for its failures of policy. After 334/945, however, the brutality of the Shiite Buyid amirs transformed the Abbasids into objects of pity rather than criticism; hence, it seems, the far more forgiving attitude of al-Ṭabarī's successors. Even under the Sunni Seljuks, who entered Baghdad in 447/1055, the security of the caliph's person and property was contingent upon his submission to the authority of the amir. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdadī, who witnessed the transition from Buyid to Seljuk rule, is perhaps not coincidentally the first biographer whose extant works ascribe Ḥadīth-transmission to al-Ma'mūn.¹⁸³

During the lifetime of al-Khaṭīb's successor Ibn 'Asākir, the Abbasid caliphate rose and fell again. In a bid to free himself from Seljuk domination, the foolhardy al-Mustarshid (r. 512–529/1118–35) marched against the Amir Mas'ūd, who captured and eventually executed him.¹⁸⁴ In a letter to Mas'ūd, the Sultan Sanjar reveals that the Seljuks, despite appearances, regarded the caliph with superstitious awe:

The moment this letter reaches you, go into the caliph's presence, kiss the ground before him, ask for his mercy and forgiveness, and beg and plead with him; for there have appeared here [in Baghdad] heavenly and earthly signs and wonders, unbearable to hear of, much less witness: storms, lightnings, and earthquakes, lasting twenty days, along with disorder in the army and disturbances in the towns. I fear for myself before God, because of His signs, and the people's refusal to pray in the mosques or let the preachers take the pulpit. It is unbearable! By God, by God, follow my order and return the caliph to his seat, with a fit retinue, as we and our fathers used to do.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² For an overview, see Laoust, "Hanbalisme," esp. 80–98.

¹⁸³ Al-Khaṭīb was evidently on good terms with the caliph al-Qā'im (r. 422–67/1031–75), whose patronage he enjoyed (*MU*, I: 497–514). ¹⁸⁴ Hillenbrand, "Mustarshid."

¹⁸⁵ Suyūṭī, *Ta'rikh*, 688–89; see further Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II: 69–71.

It was during al-Mustarshid's ill-fated reign that Ibn 'Asākir, a Damascene, made his visit to Baghdad (for five years, beginning in 520/1126).¹⁸⁶ Ibn 'Asākir's depiction of al-Ma'mūn, even more than al-Khaṭīb's before him, is consistent with the image of the caliph as representative and defender of the faith. Al-Ma'mūn is a Ḥadīth-expert who easily rattles off *isnāds*; he is also a devoted warrior who tears himself away from his beloved slave to go and die (like al-Mustarshid) at the front.¹⁸⁷

After al-Mustarshid's failed attempt to reassert the authority of the caliphate, the Abbasids acquiesced (for a time, at least) in the enforced passivity of their forebears. The Jewish traveller Benjamin of Tudela describes al-Mustaḍī' (r. 566–75/1170–80) as leaving the palace only once a year. But the people's reverence for the caliph only grew: whenever he appeared in public, they gathered in great numbers to kiss his sleeve-ends, which he dangled from a high window above the adoring crowd. "He is like the Prophet in their eyes," Benjamin reports.¹⁸⁸ The reaction of literary men to this state of affairs may be guessed from the account of Ibn Jubayr, who visited Baghdad at the same time. He describes the city as the seat of the Hāshimī imamate, but laments that "calamities and disasters" have left it "an effaced campsite and a vanished trace, a ghost of its former self." The caliphs live in "pleasant captivity" in palaces adorned with balconies and elegant gardens, but the real authority rests with pages, slaves, and eunuchs. Al-Mustaḍī' himself "appears only briefly, to keep him concealed from the common people; yet the briefer his appearances, the more famous he becomes."¹⁸⁹ It was during this period – specifically, during the reign of al-Mustaḍī's predecessor al-Mustanjid (r. 555–66/1160–70) – that the biographer Ibn al-ʿImrānī (d. 580/1184–85) composed the most laudatory of all the Abbasid biographies.

In the introduction to his *Inbā'*, Ibn al-ʿImrānī declares that his subject is "the victorious Abbasid dynasty," identical to the "Hāshimī mission of right guidance." The first entry in the *Inbā'* is devoted to the Prophet, the founder of the *ṭāʾifa*. Next come the first four caliphs, followed by brief and scabrous notices on "those Umayyads to whom power passed afterwards." After this awkward interregnum, power "returned to its rightful and worthy possessors, the family of the Prophet and his cousins [the Abbasids], who are the heirs of his knowledge and the trustees of his revelation."¹⁹⁰ Given this introduction, one might expect al-Ma'mūn's entry to defend his *imāmat al-hudā*, and it does.

¹⁸⁶ *MU*, IV: 44. ¹⁸⁷ *TMD*, XXXIX: 283–84.

¹⁸⁸ Benjamin of Tudela, *Šefer Mašaʾot*, 36–39. On the sacrality of the caliph, see further Abel, "Khalife," who argues for the religious dignity of the office even in the Umayyad period, as well as for an increasing approximation of the Abbasid caliphate to Imami and Bāṭinī images of the sacred ruler. Cf. also Tyan, *Califat*, 450–71, and Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, who document the caliph's claims to, and exercise of, religious authority. Presupposing as they did the exercise of temporal power, the legislative and theological initiatives of the early caliphs represent a different phenomenon than the sacrality of his person (treated separately in Tyan, *Califat*, 471–73), although the two aspects are doubtless related.

¹⁸⁹ *Rihlat Ibn Jubayr*, 202–03. ¹⁹⁰ Ibn al-ʿImrānī, *Inbā'*, 1–60.

However, it does so in accordance with Ibn al-ʿImrānī's notions of the office, which are "Shiite" in the Abbasid sense, and thoroughly anti-Alid. Armed with these convictions, Ibn al-ʿImrānī breaks the Sunni tradition of silence regarding the crises of al-Ma'mūn's career.

The first of these crises is ʿAlī al-Riḍā's heir apparenecy. Even Ibn al-ʿImrānī cannot find a good explanation of the caliph's motives for nominating an Alid heir. The biographer does, however, take it upon himself to explain that al-Riḍā proved unworthy of his office. After accepting the designation, he says, the heir apparent went out to a mosque and invoked God's blessings upon Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Muḥammad, ʿAlī, and himself. "When the caliphal troops saw him doing this, they dismounted en masse and prostrated themselves before him." Al-Ma'mūn, "fearing he would lose the caliphate then and there," had al-Riḍā turned back from the mosque and went out to lead the prayer himself. "Soon afterward," says Ibn al-ʿImrānī, "'ʿAlī b. Mūsā [al-Riḍā] happened to die."¹⁹¹ This report may preserve the memory of a real incident: according to Twelver Shiite sources, al-Riḍā was imprisoned in Sarakhs as the result of a similar accusation.¹⁹² For Ibn al-ʿImrānī, in any case, the point was simply that al-Riḍā did not deserve the heir apparenecy. The biographer claims that al-Riḍā died a natural death, but the implication to be drawn from the story is that if he was assassinated, it was for a good reason.

Regarding the second controversy of al-Ma'mūn's reign, the Inquisition, Ibn al-ʿImrānī employs a similar strategy. He suppresses what he cannot explain, and uses spurious reports to head off the most damaging implications for al-Ma'mūn. Of the creationist doctrine, he makes no mention. At least, he says nothing about it in al-Ma'mūn's entry, where one might expect to find it. Instead, he discusses it where it will do less harm: in the entry for another caliph. This turns out to be al-Mu'taṣim, who inherited from al-Ma'mūn the responsibility for prosecuting the Inquisition and as a consequence ordered the dissident scholar Ibn Ḥanbal to be flogged in open court (see ch. 4). Ibn al-ʿImrānī's version, which bears little resemblance to any other account of the event, fawns on Ibn Ḥanbal, alludes to the flogging only in the vaguest way, and exonerates al-Mu'taṣim. The caliph, says Ibn al-ʿImrānī, persecuted Ibn Ḥanbal only at the instigation of the judge Ibn Abī Du'ād. The latter "urged [this course of action] because he was a Mu'tazilī while [Ibn Ḥanbal] – may God be pleased with him – was the imam of Sunnism." At his trial, Ibn Ḥanbal refers to his family's support of the Abbasid revolution. Suitably impressed, the caliph releases him (in reality, he flogged him and then released him, but Ibn al-ʿImrānī's account omits this detail). "Until the day he died, Ibn Ḥanbal used to praise al-Mu'taṣim, mention this incident, and pray God to have mercy on him."¹⁹³

As Ibn al-ʿImrānī would have it, al-Mu'taṣim acted on false information given by advisors who claimed that Ibn Ḥanbal held his views in ignorance.

¹⁹¹ *Ittafaqa fī ʿaḡibi dhālik waḡātu ʿAlī b. Mūsā*. Ibid., 99.

¹⁹² *UAR*, II: 183–84; see further p. 87 below. ¹⁹³ Ibn al-ʿImrānī, *Inbāʾ*, 105.

Later, the caliph realized his error, with the blame for this unfortunate episode falling upon Ibn Abī Duʿād. Ibn Ḥanbal, descendant of the *abnāʾ al-dawla*, emerges as a loyal supporter of the Abbasids, while al-Muʿtaṣim emerges with a reputation for fairness and disputational acumen. Given his explanatory strategy, it is clear why Ibn al-ʿImrānī cannot mention the Inquisition in al-Maʾmūn's entry. The caliph was no pawn of his advisors in this matter. Rather, he espoused the creationist doctrine with unmistakable personal enthusiasm. Any explanation of why the doctrine was correct when al-Maʾmūn held it but wrong when al-Muʿtaṣim renounced it would be too awkward.

Despite its tendentious character, Ibn al-ʿImrānī's biography commands a certain respect. His Sunni predecessors avoided the matter of al-Riḍā as best they could, and mentioned the Inquisition only in the biographies of its victims. Ibn al-ʿImrānī, evidently jealous on behalf of a caliphate that in his time had become "a ghost of its former self," mounted a plucky defense of one of its most controversial dynasts. To do so, he slandered al-Riḍā but lionized Ibn Ḥanbal, doubtless a prudent choice. With regard to the Inquisition, his solution is more economical than that of the Ḥanbalī biographers, who invoke miracles to explain the scholar's release (see ch. 4). Although later Sunni compilers could not accept al-Maʾmūn as an *imām al-hudā*, they did adopt (consciously or otherwise) al-ʿImrānī's strategy of exculpating the *miḥma*-caliphs by blaming their advisors.

The Ḥadīth-men strike back

The Mamluk tradition of Syria and Egypt marks a final transformation in al-Maʾmūn's reputation. After the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in 656/1258, Arabic biography, like the Abbasid caliphate itself, moved westward into a new era. In his recent study of Arabic historiography, Tarif Khalidi has emphasized the variety of new perspectives in Ayyubid- and Mamluk-period writings on the past. The historians, he says, display an increasing willingness to interrupt historical narration with "personal comments or opinions on people and events," as well as a new assertiveness in criticizing contemporary rulers. At the same time, they deplore the retrojection of current opinion upon the representation of past figures, and display great skill in identifying the biases of their colleagues.¹⁹⁴ Those biographers who renewed the study of the Abbasid caliphs demonstrate a boldness and critical acumen that bear out Khalidi's impressions. They evince an eagerness to pass judgement, and an admirable zeal in assembling whatever evidence might serve as a basis for their evaluations. At the same time, their temporal remove from the early Abbasid caliphate permitted assessments more dispassionate than those of their predecessors who were embroiled in the endemic factional turmoil of Baghdad.

The most important caliphal biographer in the Mamluk tradition, Shams

¹⁹⁴ Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 182–204.

al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), deals with al-Ma'mūn as a biographical figure in his own right, and as a personality to be analyzed in the entry devoted to Ibn Ḥanbal.¹⁹⁵ Al-Ma'mūn, he says, “was one of the great Abbasids, with many virtues overall.” Unfortunately, he was also a Shiite. The designation of an Alid heir does not disturb al-Dhahabī: elsewhere, he declares al-Riḍā to have been “a person of importance, and worthy of the caliphate.”¹⁹⁶ Rather, the problem with al-Ma'mūn's Shiism is that it led him to espouse the doctrine of the *khalq al-Qur'ān*. In his entry on Ibn Ḥanbal, the biographer elaborates on this judgement. The Muslim community, he says “had always held that the Qur'ān is the speech of God, inspired and revealed by Him, and had thought no more of the matter until the doctrine suddenly appeared declaring it . . . created and made, and attributed to Him only honorifically.” The Jahmīya, who espoused this view, kept it a secret during the reigns of al-Mahdī, al-Rashīd, and al-Amīn. But then

the caliph al-Ma'mūn appeared. He was an intelligent man and a speculative theologian, with an interest in the rational sciences. He collected the books of the ancient Greeks and had their philosophy translated into Arabic. He exerted vigorous efforts in these endeavors. Not only the Mu'tazilīs and Jahmīs but indeed the Shiites came to the fore, he being one of the latter. Eventually he was led to summon the community to assent to the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'ān. He put the scholars to the test, and was unrelenting [in his prosecution of the Inquisition]. In the same year he died, leaving a legacy of calamity and disaster to the faith.¹⁹⁷

Al-Dhahabī's student Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370) also deals with al-Ma'mūn in a biographical entry on Ibn Ḥanbal. There he takes pains to show off the attractive aspects of the caliph's character. “Historians have mentioned that he excelled in *fiqh*, Arabic, and tribal history, all while being decisive, resolute, clement, learned, wily, awe-inspiring, tolerant, intelligent, eloquent, and pious.” He relates anecdotes demonstrating al-Ma'mūn's knowledge of Ḥadīth, his respect for scholars, his generosity, and his forbearance. “Our only aim,” says al-Subkī of his digression, “has been to show that [al-Ma'mūn] was a scholar and a good man.” Then, like al-Dhahabī before him, al-Subkī proceeds to argue that al-Ma'mūn's interest in philosophy – specifically, “the little he knew of ancient learning” – led him to adopt and enforce the dogma of the created Qur'ān. Even so, the blame does not fall squarely on the caliph. Rather, al-Subkī argues, the fault lies with “evil scholars” (*fuqahā' al-sū'*), particularly Ibn Abī Du'ād, who led him and his successors astray.¹⁹⁸

The last representative of the Mamluk tradition, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), proves the sternest critic of al-Ma'mūn. He praises the caliph's learning and piety, but deplores the “excessive Shiite tendencies” that led him to confer the succession upon 'Alī al-Riḍā. Al-Suyūṭī seems aware of the

¹⁹⁵ *SA*N, X: 272–90 (al-Ma'mūn); XI: 177–358 (Ibn Ḥanbal; see further ch. 4).

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, IX: 387–93 (see further ch. 3). ¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, XI: 236.

¹⁹⁸ Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, II: 56–59.

Shiite readings of the episode, mentioning, for example, the claim that al-Ma'mūn intended to abdicate in favor of al-Riḍā.¹⁹⁹ This allegation is common in Twelver sources (though Ibn al-ʿImrānī was aware of it as well). He also includes the report, first adduced by al-Masʿūdī, of the caliph's meeting with Zubayda.²⁰⁰ By adducing this report, he seems to say that al-Ma'mūn had praiseworthy intentions in nominating al-Riḍā (and therefore, it seems, cannot have murdered him).

Misguided as it may have been the designation of Riḍā pales in comparison to the caliph's major crime: the proclamation of the created Qur'ān and the subsequent persecution of the Ḥadīth-scholars. Like his predecessors, al-Suyūṭī does not realize that the Ḥadīth-attributions to al-Ma'mūn are dubious. Following Ibn ʿAsākir and al-Dhahabī, he lists al-Ma'mūn's teachers and those who related on his authority, and retells the story of the caliph's Ḥadīth-lecture. But he also uses his biographer's privilege of drawing together disparate evidence to reach a general conclusion about his subject. His conclusion, in a word, is that for al-Ma'mūn, much learning proved a dangerous thing. It was his "interest in philosophy and the ancient sciences" that "led him to espouse the creation of the Qur'ān." When he declared the *khalq al-Qur'ān* an article of faith, "people were outraged, and the country stood on the brink of insurrection." Lest the reader doubt the enormity of this event, al-Suyūṭī comes back to it in the concluding section of the *Ta'rikh*. There he discusses the saying that "every hundred years, a calamity befalls the Muslims." In the second century, the calamities were the civil war between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, and the Inquisition. Of the two, the Inquisition was worse, because it was the first tribulation "to compromise [the community's] religious mission with heretical innovation. No caliph before [al-Ma'mūn] had ever summoned the community to anything resembling heresy." In al-Suyūṭī's view, the Inquisition was more than misguided theology; it was a world-historical catastrophe.²⁰¹

The Mamluk-period accounts of al-Ma'mūn's career demonstrate that biographers did not confine themselves to commenting upon and correcting older biographies. Rather, they used the genre to re-evaluate their subjects' careers in light of reports they found in the annals, producing in the process a reinterpretation of the historical events themselves. As heirs to the labors of their predecessors, al-Dhahabī, al-Subkī, and al-Suyūṭī had no choice but to credit the sixth/eleventh century transformation of al-Ma'mūn into a Ḥadīth-scholar. They dutifully reproduced the reports that credit the caliph with expertise in Ḥadīth. But their commitment to exposing the "characters and dispositions" of their subject led them to consider *all* the available evidence, including the caliph's interest in philosophy, his appointment of al-Riḍā, and his belief in the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān. As a result, they were able to undo, or at least put into unflattering perspective, the centuries-old misrepre-

¹⁹⁹ See below, p. 92.

²⁰⁰ Suyūṭī, *Ta'rikh*, 491–92.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 489, 492, 497, 837.

sensation of al-Ma'mūn as a pillar of Ḥadīth. This re-evaluation, in turn, restored to the *miḥna* its full significance as a formative crisis in the relationship between the scholars and the state.

Conclusions

Al-Ma'mūn reportedly commented that “a ruler will forgive anything except tale-telling, violations of privacy, and attacks on the dynasty,” or in a variant, “attacks on kingship.”²⁰² Fortunately, biographers routinely ignored his warning. Their irreverence does not imply doubts about al-Ma'mūn's legitimacy as caliph. It does, however, set caliphal biography apart from other sub-genres of *ṭā'ifa*-based historiography. The biographers of Shiite Imams, Ḥanbalī scholars, and Sufis emphasize their subjects' heirship to the Prophet, a heirship most conspicuously manifested in *ilm*, knowledge. In his day, al-Ma'mūn claimed a similar legacy for himself. Indeed, he specifically declared himself the *imām al-hudā*, “the rightly guided leader.” The majority of his biographers, however, did not endorse this claim. For Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, al-Ma'mūn was a good king, learned, clement, and forbearing. For al-Ṭabarī, he was an eloquent and poetically gifted sovereign with (we may infer) dangerous ideas about the Qur'ān. For al-Mas'ūdī, he was a caliph but not an imam, an honor the biographer reserved for the Alids. Ibn Abī Ṭāhir and al-Ṭabarī do cite the Inquisition-letters in which the caliph makes his claim to the *imāmat al-hudā*, and Ibn Abī Ṭāhir cites a few reports that imply acquiescence in the claim. Outside these passages, however, al-Ma'mūn's early biographers depict him as a king, not a “knower” and an heir to the Prophet.

In the second stage of Ma'mūnid biography, Sunni scholars suddenly insist that he did have *ilm*. However, they define it, in proper Sunni fashion, as consisting of Ḥadīth. Al-Ma'mūn doubtless knew Ḥadīth. However, it seems to have consisted of the Abbasid reports his family had favored since the days of al-Manṣūr. Moreover, he proclaimed that he was the best qualified to interpret the Prophetic (and caliphal) *sunna*. In consequence, he took a dim view of the Ḥadīth-scholars. He denounced them as ignoramuses, accused them of sedition, and set in motion the Inquisition that interrogated, imprisoned, and chastised many of them. The Sunni rehabilitation of al-Ma'mūn glosses over these complications. It depicts him as learned in Ḥadīth and deferential to the scholars. The evidence it uses to do so is suspect, originating as it does with scholars who had broken the taboo against serving the state. This does not mean that the reports are entirely false. Some, indeed, contain plausible elements, particularly the mention of Ḥadīth with specifically Abbasid *isnāds*. Although the image they present of al-Ma'mūn contradicts his own writings, as well as the depiction of him in earlier biographies, it does accord with the later Sunni image of the Abbasid caliph as representative and defender of the

²⁰² Ṣābi', *Rusūm* 50; variant in *MDh*, IV: 7; also *TMD*, XXXIX: 262.

faith. Even the critical Sunni biographers of the Mamluk period make no attempt to overturn the entrenched notion that al-Ma'mūn was a Ḥadīth-scholar. However, their works do return to the older tradition of granting al-Ma'mūn one kind of authority while denying him another. He was caliph and a king, but not a rightly guided *imām*: indeed, his Inquisition was a calamity for the faith. The only biographer who grants him imamic dignity is the Seljuk-period author Ibn al-ʿImrānī, but then again he granted it to all the Abbasid caliphs. When it comes to the two great crises of al-Ma'mūn's reign, even Ibn al-ʿImrānī must resort to misdirection and tactful silence to preserve the caliph's reputation.

Despite their legitimist stances, all the sources preserve memories, albeit distorted ones, of al-Ma'mūn's crises of authority. As far as the sources allow us to judge, Baghdadi opposition to al-Ma'mūn manifested itself in several distinct but interrelated forms. The Baghdad *abnā'* and the *ʿayyārūn* had fought for al-Amīn during the siege of Baghdad, and later sided with the counter-caliph Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī. The vigilante movement, which evidently drew its adherents from the class of small proprietors, resisted the *ʿayyārūn* on one side and the counter-caliph on the other, though it eventually capitulated, in the person of Sahl b. Salāma, to the authority of al-Ma'mūn. Religious opposition from the isolationist wing of the proto-Sunnis (see ch. 4) had a popular dimension as well, being associated with craftsmen, skilled laborers, and shopkeepers. Within proto-Sunnism, moreover, there appears to have been a specifically ascetic strain of opposition to the caliphate. The writings of al-Jāhīz as well as the *miḥna*-letters describe these ascetics as anthropomorphists and thus collaborators in proto-Sunni heresy (see further ch. 5).

In the face of such worrisome hostility, state-sympathetic transmitters evidently siezed on the comforting notion that al-Ma'mūn could outwit the representatives of proto-Sunni vigilantism. These transmitters conflated the vigilantes, the dissident Ḥadīth-scholars, and the ascetics into a single figure: a zealot who challenges the caliph and comes away defeated. The first such report is an evident fabrication based on an older report about a commoner hauled before the grievance-court. The model for the transformation also appears to have been real. It is the caliph's encounter with the vigilante leader Sahl b. Salāma, who met with him and came away satisfied with his imamate. In later incarnations, the zealot's appearance and argument change, as do al-Ma'mūn's rebuttals. In al-Mas'ūdī's version, the caliph admits that he holds his position by accident, and would concede it to a better candidate. In Ibn ʿAsākir's, he delivers a ringing defense of his exclusive right to uphold the *sunna*. In al-Khaṭīb's *Ta'rīkh* we find a version told from the zealot's point of view, in which both caliph and vigilante emerge as defenders of a *sunna*. Significantly, however, this particular vigilante turns out to have been a Zaydī.

These many transformations bear out the impression of Hilāl al-Ṣābi' (d. 448/1056–57), who declared caliphal biography to have been “influenced by the play of opinion, altered by tendentious reworkings of all kinds, trans-

formed by the passing of successive and turbulent ages, and compromised by migrating *isnāds*.”²⁰³ Even so, one trend is clear. Al-Ma'mūn's biographers accepted his caliphate but rejected his imamate. This rejection is never explicit. Some biographers appear indifferent to his claim, while others think it unworthy of serious discussion. Others, again, accept it in theory, but then redefine it out of existence, or avoid defending its operation in practice. Whatever their intentions may have been, the result of their labors was to strip al-Ma'mūn of imamic authority in the eyes of posterity. Ironically, this process derived much of its momentum from the work of biographers who respected and even revered the Abbasids. In praising al-Ma'mūn as a just king or a Ḥadīth-authority, they probably meant no harm. Yet to praise an imam as anything less than an imam is to reject his claim to the office. In effect, the biographers accepted al-Ma'mūn's reported argument that he was caliph simply because someone had to be. Many of his contemporaries evidently accepted this argument as well. As compensation, however, they insisted on keeping the title “imam” for someone else.

²⁰³ Ṣābi', *Rusūm*, 141.

The Imam ‘Alī al-Riḍā

Those who pose questions only want to test [me] and find a path to doubt and misbelief . . . Don’t you and your crowd see that I respond to [your inquiries] when I can remain silent instead?

‘Alī al-Riḍā, cited by al-Kashshī¹

Introduction

The Twelver Shiites believe that their Imams represent a tradition of heirship to the Prophet through ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, Muḥammad’s cousin, son-in-law, and designated successor. In an oration delivered at Ghadīr Khumm during the last year of his life, the Prophet took ‘Alī’s hand and announced: “Whoever is my affiliate is ‘Alī’s also.” He warned the assembled Muslims that when he died they would be responsible for two legacies he was leaving in their care. The first was the Qur’ān, and the second was the people of his household: his daughter Fāṭima, her husband ‘Alī, and their sons al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn. This speech, attested in Sunni as well as Shiite sources (though not in Ibn Ishāq’s *Sīra* or al-Tabarī’s *Ta’rīkh*), supported the claim that the Prophet had appointed ‘Alī his successor.² In the event, however, the succession took a different path. When Muḥammad died, ‘Alī and Fāṭima remained with his body while the Muslims at the Saqīfa pledged allegiance to Abū Bakr. After being passed over twice more, ‘Alī finally became caliph in 35/656. Five years later he was assassinated, and Mu‘āwiya, the governor of Syria, assumed the caliphate for himself and the Umayyads. ‘Alī’s son al-Ḥasan made a counterclaim, but abdicated under Umayyad pressure. Another son, al-Ḥusayn, rose in revolt and was killed, along with a small party of followers, by Umayyad troops at Karbalā’ (61/680). In later generations, ‘Alī’s descendants, the Alids, periodically incited or joined similar uprisings only to suffer brutal retaliation from the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs. The partisans (*shī‘a*) of the Alids thus came to regard the family’s history as one of righteous struggle against

¹ Kashshī, *Ikhtiyār*, 603.

² Ya’qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, II: 125; cf. Nawbakhtī, *Fīraq*, 28–32; Laoust, “Role,” 24–26.

usurpers bent on thwarting the succession the Prophet had prayed for at Ghadīr Khumm.³

Within the Shia itself, however, opinions differed on the identity of the Alid best qualified to claim the imamate or leadership of the community. Some held that one Alid in each generation was the one true Imam, that is, the possessor of authoritative knowledge (*ilm*) of the revelation and the law. Some held that Alid descent and *ilm* were sufficient conditions for leadership, and indeed the only attributes of the Imam. Others, however, ascribed to him infallibility and even immortality.⁴ Claims of the latter sort appear to have arisen because of disputes over the identity of the Imam. According to the works of later heresiographers, the Shia was riven by conflicting allegiances to the various Alids who claimed the imamate, or had it claimed (sometimes posthumously) on their behalf. Even if we take into account the heresiographers' tendency to multiply schools and reify every subtle shift of opinion, it is still evident that lively debates about the nature and identity of the Imam were commonplace among Shiites. In this contentious atmosphere, some claimants distinguished themselves from their rivals by attributing an ever-increasing range of powers to themselves. Should an aspiring Imam hesitate to offer such claims on his own behalf, his adherents, our sources show, would offer them in his stead. The frequently acrimonious disputes that ensued appear to have put at least some of the candidates in an awkward position. We find them exerting themselves to restrain their followers' enthusiasm, or struggling to reply to visitors who demand immediate proof of their imamate. Even the death of an aspirant only set off another round of claims and counter-claims. Those partisans who hoped for his messianic return would recount tales of his miraculous escape from death, while those who had embraced a successor would reply with equally elaborate stories of the old Imam's final agony.

At the close of the second century, many Imami Shiites had come to agree that the previous Imams had been 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, his sons al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, and then (according to some) al-Ḥusayn's lineal descendants 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, Muḥammad al-Bāqir, Ja'far al-Šādiq, and Mūsā al-Kāẓim. By that time, too, the Imamis had articulated a vision of the imamate as a gift from God. The Imams, like the prophets, offered the promise of salvation, and like them were fated to meet with scorn and persecution. Creeds expressing this vision were ascribed to all the historical Imams, especially 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. According to one such creed, the office of Imam owes its origins to the time before the creation of the world. First, God took a part of His own light and created the Prophet Muḥammad. After eliciting the obedience of the future generations of mankind (Qur'ān 7: 172), He taught them that "guidance is with [Muḥammad], that the light is his, and that the imamate is his family's."

³ See, e.g., Khuwarizmī, *Rasā'il*, 160–61.

⁴ On the early development of Imami Shiism see Hodgson, "Early Shī'a"; Hodgson, *Venture*, I: 256–67, 372ff.; Rajkowski, *Early Shī'ism*; Kohlberg, "From Imāmīya" and "Imam and Community"; Jafri, *Origins*; Momen, *Introduction*; Modarressi, *Crisis*.

Next God “placed the Universe, and unfurled Time,” creating the earth, the sky, the angels, and finally Adam, repository of the divine light.

Then the light passed into our natures, and shone forth in our Imams. We are the lights of the sky and the lights of the earth. Through us is salvation, and from us comes hidden knowledge. History leads to us, and with our *mahdī* [roughly, “redeemer”] comes the last and decisive sign: the seal of the Imams, the savior of the community, and the terminus of the light. We are the most excellent of created beings, the noblest of those who attest God’s unity, and the proofs of the Lord of the Universe. Let him who professes allegiance to us be congratulated on his good fortune.⁵

The Imams are thus the heirs of the prophets because of a divine spark that passed from the Prophet to ‘Alī and his descendants. One of these descendants, moreover, will return to deliver the faithful at the end of time. On this view, the Prophet’s announcement at Ghadīr Khumm did not make ‘Alī his successor. Rather, it was a ceremonial acknowledgement of a succession God had ordained before the creation of the world.

The claimant eventually chosen by many Shiites as the eighth Imam was ‘Alī b. Mūsā b. Ja‘far b. Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, called al-Riḍā.⁶ Early non-Shiite historians, even those sympathetic to the Alids, have almost nothing to say about him except that he was nominated as heir apparent by al-Ma’mūn and died shortly thereafter. One of his companions reportedly wrote an account of his death, but it is nowhere cited in the extant sources.⁷ Also lost is the entry on him in the *Maqātil al-ṭālibīyīn* by Muhammad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamza (d. 287/900), although extracts of it survive in a work of the same title by Abū ‘l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. 356/967). In this work, al-Iṣfahānī evinces a Zaydī Shiite rather than an Imami notion of the imamate. That is, he takes a sympathetic interest in any Alid who rose against the government, but does not revere a particular subset of Alids as divinely gifted Imams. Bounded by his interest in the “murders” of the Alids, his entry on al-Riḍā deals only with the latter’s heir apparency and death. The entry is an important early source for these events, but adds little to our understanding of al-Riḍā’s early career or his reputation among the Imami Shiites of his day.

Given the paucity of early source material, the modern reader must depend largely on a relatively late and thoroughly tendentious corpus of writings on al-Riḍā, that of the Twelver Shiites.⁸ The Twelvers, today the largest single Shiite group in the world, are an Imami community that derives its name from the number of Imams it recognizes as the legitimate bearers of the title. The list begins with ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn, and continues through the latter’s descendants, including al-Riḍā. It ends with the Imam

⁵ *MDh*, I: 32–33.

⁶ The chroniclers plausibly state that al-Ma’mūn gave him his title (see ch. 2), but Twelver biographers insist that the Shiites did (*UAR*, I: 13–14).

⁷ *Wafāt al-Riḍā*, credited (Najāshī, *Rijāl*, 184) to Abū al-Ṣalt al-Harawī (see below).

⁸ For a comprehensive compilation see Amīn, *A‘yān*, IV (part 2), *passim*. The best critical account is Madelung, “Alī al-Rezā.”

Muḥammad al-Qā'im, who made one appearance before vanishing without an heir in 260/874. The Twelvers believe that al-Qā'im will return, after an occultation of unspecified length, to "fill the world with justice as it is now filled with injustice."⁹ These doctrines crystallized around the year 300 AH, after which we find al-Riḍā's name in lists of the canonical twelve Imams.¹⁰ Within a century came the biographies, the earliest extant being the capacious *'Uyūn akhbār al-Riḍā* by Ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī (d. 381/991).

According to the Twelver sources, 'Alī al-Riḍā was born in Medina in 148/765 or 153/770. His father Mūsā al-Kāẓim had been Imam before him, and designated him as his successor. Al-Kāẓim died in Baghdad in 183/799, allegedly poisoned by order of the caliph al-Rashīd. Al-Riḍā thereupon claimed the imamate. A group of his father's followers, called the *wāqifa*, nevertheless refused to acknowledge him, claiming instead that al-Kāẓim was either still alive or in occultation.¹¹ An exchange quoted in Ibn Bābawayh's biography provides what may be a genuine impression of al-Riḍā's early reputation outside his community. A non-Shiite speaker recalls that al-Riḍā "used to speak of theology (*takallam*) in Medina, and gather theologians (*aṣḥāb al-kalām*) around him." A Shiite interlocutor corrects him, saying: "The pilgrims would come to him and ask him about what was permitted and what was not, and he would answer them. Sometimes he would use *kalām* against those who argued with him."¹² Al-Riḍā's only recorded political activity in this period amounts to a brief involvement in negotiations between the Abbasid government and an Alid rebel. In 200/815, his uncle Muḥammad b. Ja'far declared himself caliph in Medina, but an Abbasid army defeated him and eventually forced him to recant. According to the Zaydī biographer al-İṣfahānī, the Abbasid general asked al-Riḍā to deliver a message to the rebel calling upon him to surrender.¹³ From this brief reference it appears that al-Riḍā did not advocate rebellion against the state, and indeed could be called upon to cooperate with the Abbasid authorities.

In Ramaḍān 201/March 817, the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn declared al-Riḍā his heir apparent. The designation undoubtedly affirmed al-Riḍā's position as head of the Alid house, a position long understood as co-extensive with the imamate. But for the Shiites who believed in al-Riḍā's imamate it upset every preconceived notion of how caliphs and Imams were supposed to behave. The Twelver sources expend a great deal of effort to explain why al-Ma'mūn nominated al-Riḍā, why the latter accepted the charge, and why, despite the appearance of good will, the caliph was merely upholding the long caliphal tradition of plotting against the Alids.¹⁴ For their part, the

⁹ See further Kohlberg, "From Imāmīya" and "Imam and Community"; Arjomand, "Crisis," Arjomand, *Authority*. ¹⁰ Kohlberg, "From Imāmīya."

¹¹ *Waqf* means declaring an end to the imamic succession; those who do so are called *wāqifa* (sing. *wāqif*). For Twelvers, *waqf* is a heresy except in the case of the last Imam.

¹² *UAR*, I: 177–78; see also Madelung, "'Alī al-Rezā," at I: 877.

¹³ İṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 360; Gabrieli, *Ma'mūn*, 27. Cf. *UAR*, II: 161, II: 207.

¹⁴ *UAR*, II: 175.

non-Twelve sources dwell on the civil war that broke out in Iraq as a result of the designation but say little about al-Riḍā or his heir apparenty. The historians agree that he traveled from Medina to the capital in Marv and received the oath of allegiance as heir apparent; his son took al-Ma'mūn's daughter in marriage.¹⁵ Al-Iṣfahānī, the only non-Twelve to describe these events in any detail, states that al-Riḍā was reluctant to accept the honor, and did so only on condition that he serve al-Ma'mūn in an advisory capacity. According to al-Ṭabarī, it was al-Riḍā who informed al-Ma'mūn of the Abbasid counter-caliphate in Baghdad. A Twelver report concedes as much, albeit with a good deal of fanciful elaboration.¹⁶

When al-Ma'mūn decided to return to Iraq and reassert his authority there, the heir apparent set out with him. In a town called Sanābād, on the outskirts of Nūqān in the region of Ṭūs, al-Riḍā fell ill and died (Ṣafar 203/September 818).¹⁷ Al-Ma'mūn ordered his body interred beside that of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, who had perished in Ṭūs a decade earlier while campaigning against rebels in Khurasan. Sunni chroniclers of the Abbasid caliphate follow al-Ṭabarī in attributing al-Riḍā's death to a surfeit of grapes.¹⁸ Most Imami biographers, on the other hand, consider his appointment an act of caliphal duplicity and his death a consequence of deliberate poisoning. In favor of the latter view is the convenience, for al-Ma'mūn, of suddenly being rid of the greatest single obstacle to a reconciliation with his Abbasid relatives. In favor of the caliph's innocence, on the other hand, are his well-known pro-Alid views, which he maintained until the end of his life (see above, ch. 2), as well as the absence of credible reports of his guilt, even in pro-Alid and Shiite sources.

Pious visits to al-Riḍā's tomb seem to have begun soon after his death, and classical works attest to a continuous tradition of pilgrimage (*ziyāra*) to the site. The fourth/tenth-century geographer Ibn Ḥawqal referred to the place as a *mashhad*, "tomb-shrine," later the name of the town that grew up around it. In his biography of the Imam, Ibn Bābawayh provides the reader with prayers to recite at the shrine.¹⁹ The present mausoleum, centerpiece of the Iranian city of Mashhad, dates back to the reign of Il-Khanid sultan Muḥammad Khudābanda Uljaytū (d. 717/1317), with many additions and restorations dating to Safavid and Qajar times.²⁰ Today, it is one of the major pilgrimage sites anywhere in the world. In a recent study, Nasrine Hakami estimates the number of visitors in 1974 to have been over five million. Popular Iranian Shiism regards Emām Reżā (as he is called in Persian) as a refugee buried far from his ancestors. At the same time, he reigns as the "King of Khurasan"

¹⁵ Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rīkh*, II: 550–51; *TRM*, VIII: 554; Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 374ff.

¹⁶ *TRM*, VIII: 564; cf. *UAR*, II: 160.

¹⁷ There is some dispute about this date, which appears to contradict the numismatic evidence. See Sourdel, *Vizirat*, II: 210–11.

¹⁸ *TRM*, VIII: 554, 568; also Ibn A'tham, *Futūḥ*, VIII:322ff.

¹⁹ *UAR*, II: 254–88. ²⁰ Mu'tamin, *Rāhnamā*; Streck, "Mashhad."

with the mausoleum as his court. Folk poetry calls his shrine “the Mecca of the poor” and deems a visit there equivalent to a thousand pilgrimages to the Kaʿba. Visitors inundate the tomb with written petitions asking all the Imams, particularly the twelfth, to admit them to Heaven, to spare them torment in the grave, and to enable them to visit the shrines of other Imams. Other petitions beg for a house, a television set, a spouse, a job, or exemption from military service. Pilgrims who come to thank Reẓā for granting their wishes leave offerings of money, carpets, and furniture, or, in the case of cures, objects symbolizing the healed limb or organ. As the pilgrims make their threefold perambulation of the cenotaph, they pass the nearby tomb of Hārūn al-Rashīd. As they do so, they curse him and al-Maʿmūn.²¹

In petitioning the Imams collectively while retaining the memory of al-Riḍā’s particular fate, the Mashhad pilgrims recapitulate a salient feature of Twelver biography. As a divinely inspired guide, each Imam is interchangeable with his successors and predecessors. Much of what al-Riḍā says and does in his biographies could with equal plausibility be attributed to any of the other Imams. To this extent, his Twelver vitae resemble the productions of Christian hagiography, whether Western or Byzantine, which often take place “fictively in some far-off moment of the past” or in “the reversible time of myths.”²² As individuals, however, each of the Imams carried out his mission at a particular juncture in history. Unlike the typical saintly vita, therefore, a Twelver biography purports to establish precise chronology using exact dates and *isnāds* for its *akhbār*.²³ One reason for maintaining this appearance of accuracy is polemical. The biographers were writing not only for the Twelver community but against the historical traditions of other Shiite groups, as well as that of the Sunnis (whom they call *al-ʿamma*, “the ignorant mass”). Scholars in each camp objected, or could potentially object, to every significant claim of historical fact or interpretation made by scholars in the other. The following remark of al-Majlisī (d. 1111/1699 or 1700) makes it clear that the interpretation of a (supposedly) non-doctrinal matter such as the death of al-Riḍā was divided along sectarian lines:

Know that our side and the other side disagree about whether the blessed al-Riḍā died a natural death, or whether he perished as a martyr, by poison; and if the latter, whether it was the accursed al-Maʿmūn or someone else who poisoned him. The more prevalent view on our side is that he died a martyr, poisoned by al-Maʿmūn.²⁴

Even within this ostensibly historical framework, the content of many *akhbār* is thoroughly mythographic. In particular, Twelver biography abandons historical plausibility insofar as it treats al-Riḍā in light of later, fully developed notions of the imamate. For this reason, it defies modern critical attempts to discern how al-Riḍā himself understood the office. An interesting remark in

²¹ Hakami, *Pèlerinage*, 42–59.

²² See Delehay, *Legends*; Patlagean, “Ancient Byzantine Historiography”; Boyer, “Attempt,” 28–31. The citations are from Patlagean, 111.

²³ E.g., *UAR*, I: 18–19.

²⁴ Majlisī, *Bihār*, XII: 311.

this regard is that of the Sunni biographer al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), who describes al-Riḍā as “a person of importance, and worthy of the caliphate.” But, he says, the Shiites “fabricated lies about him, and attributed to him things he never said,” including the claim that he was infallible.²⁵ Technically, al-Dhahabī is probably right, unless we believe that al-Riḍā understood the office in precisely the same way scholars writing two centuries later did. Unfortunately, his Twelver biographers tend to represent him as doing just that.²⁶ Even so, their writings provide good evidence that he did claim the imamate. This evidence consists of reports that preserve, whether by necessity or through inadvertence, memories of the Imam’s sometimes unsuccessful struggle to make his claim persuasive. From a reading of these reports, we can propose an account of the circumstances – including the nomination to the heir apparenancy – under which al-Riḍā endeavored to win the allegiance of his contemporaries. This account, in turn, permits an appreciation of how much transmitters and biographers contributed to the eventual success of his efforts.

The construction of al-Riḍā’s imamate

As Aviad Kleinberg has shown in the case of Christian saints of the later Middle Ages, a reputation for sanctity did not arise naturally as a result of the candidate’s charisma. Rather, it was the result of a complex negotiation that involved the prospective saint, his or her contemporaries (sympathetic and hostile), and the Latin-literate biographers who chose a particular version of the saint’s life for commemoration.²⁷ The construction of al-Riḍā’s imamate can be described as the result of a comparable process of development. The process began in the Imam’s lifetime, during which he strove to guide his followers, persuade doubters, refute opponents, and bring malcontents back into the fold. After his death, reports of his words and deeds were incrementally modified to conform to developments in Imami doctrine, or simply retold for greater effect. This process of transmission, modification, and elaboration culminated in the *‘Uyūn* of Ibn Bābawayh, who enshrined one set of reports as canonical.²⁸ The presence of many explicitly polemical reports confirms that al-Riḍā’s imamate was a matter of dispute. Admittedly, many reports appear to have been elaborated or fabricated by pro-Riḍā transmitters. Yet even these seem to preserve a memory, albeit distorted, of al-Riḍā’s struggle for recognition.

In compiling the *‘Uyūn*, Ibn Bābawayh was interested not only in al-Riḍā,

²⁵ *SAN*, IX: 387–93.

²⁶ One might argue that al-Riḍā would have known the teachings of his predecessors al-Bāqir, al-Ṣādiq, and al-Kāzīm on the imamate. However, the argument cannot be made merely by citing the existence of these figures, because our sources on them are just as mythographic as the ones on al-Riḍā. ²⁷ Kleinberg, *Prophets, passim*.

²⁸ On Ibn Bābawayh see Fyzee, *Creed*, 6–23. The *‘Uyūn* is dedicated (I: 2–8) to the Buyid viceroy of al-Rayy, al-Ṣāhib ibn ‘Abbād (d. 385/955). See further Tawhīdī, *Akhlaq*, 166; Madelung, “Imamism,” 13–29; Kraemer, *Humanism*, 66.

but also in affirming the newly crystallized creed of Twelver Shiism in the face of various opponents. Given his polemical aims, it is hardly surprising that Ibn Bābawayh’s doctrinal preoccupations should be evident in his biographical practice. What is surprising, though, is the extent to which his “evidence” for al-Riḍā’s imamate preserves the memory of the controversies that raged over the issue in the Imam’s time. Of course, the reports we find in Ibn Bābawayh had already undergone a good deal of recasting by the time they reached him. Only occasionally does a given report betray its origin in a particular stage of the process. Moreover, all the reports are subordinated to his program of exposition, which undoubtedly distorts the nature of whatever debates were occurring nearly two centuries before. Even so, the sheer quantity of reports makes it possible to gain a sense of the different stages through which al-Riḍā’s reputation passed before assuming its canonical form.

Ibn Bābawayh’s *‘Uyūn* cites many proofs that al-Riḍā was the eighth Imam. Many of these proofs are simply apodictic. On several occasions, for example, his father al-Kāẓim pointed to him and declared: “This is my heir.”²⁹ In his last will and testament, his father also named him as his executor.³⁰ Moreover, the list of Imams transmitted by God to Muḥammad and Fāṭima reportedly contained al-Riḍā’s name.³¹ Most of the proofs, however, consist of al-Riḍā’s replies to questions about ritual and law. One Ismā‘īl b. Bazī‘, for example, asks him about the proper order of prayer, the legal status of figured garments, the disposition of orphans promised in marriage, and the necessity of veiling in the presence of eunuchs.³² On one level, these questions are genuine requests for information. As al-Riḍā is made to say, the community needed imamic rulings to clarify the Qur’ān and *sunna*.³³ On another level, they imply a broader challenge: can al-Riḍā answer any question satisfactorily? In other words, is he really the Imam?³⁴

In questions about ritual and law, the challenge is usually implicit. Occasionally, though, apparently innocuous reports contain references to opinions (inevitably ascribed to a third party) that appear to contradict al-Riḍā’s rulings, along with an implied request that he clarify his position. Told that gold and silver vessels are reprehensible, his interlocutor Ismā‘īl b. Bazī‘ mentions that “some associates of ours relate that [your father] Mūsā [al-Kāẓim] owned a silver-plated mirror.” No, replies the Imam, it was a plain mirror, although it did have a silver bracket.³⁵ In more obvious cases, queries were evidently constructed simply to determine whether al-Riḍā could answer them. One interlocutor, for example, asks al-Riḍā why God created many

²⁹ *UAR*, I: 20–33. On the *naṣṣ* see Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 30; Momen, *Introduction*, 153–55; Modarressi, *Crisis*, 122, note 93.

³⁰ The document does not mention the imamate specifically. However, Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq reportedly used a similar testament to confer the succession upon al-Kāẓim (Rajkowski, *Early Shī‘ism*, 563–64). ³¹ *UAR*, I: 42–45. ³² *UAR*, II: 18–20. ³³ *UAR*, II: 20–21.

³⁴ Cf. Kohlberg, “Imam and Community,” which shows that Imami scholars displayed various attitudes ranging from acceptance to disagreement with the opinions of living Imams.

³⁵ *UAR*, II: 18.

species instead of just one. Another wants to know why God drowned innocent children in Noah's flood. Yet another demands to hear why Pharaoh's conversion was invalid.³⁶ Even more unfriendly are the questions that probe the history of the Alid family and the imamate. If 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib was so conspicuously virtuous, why did his contemporaries not rally around him? Why did he wait twenty-five years to fight for his rights? And why did the imamate go to al-Ḥusayn's children instead of al-Ḥasan's?³⁷ Outside the *'Uyūn*, in a report preserved by al-Kashshī, a man asks the most basic question of all: "Are you an Imam?"³⁸ I have found only one comparable report in Ibn Bābawayh, whose sources appear to have recognized that a simple "yes" (al-Riḍā's reply in both cases) was less persuasive than a demonstration of *'ilm*.³⁹

Admittedly, one can imagine a perplexed believer asking such questions for his own edification. But al-Riḍā's reputation would still depend on his ability to provide satisfactory replies to questions that only an Imam can answer. In the case of Ja'far al-Šādiq, we are told that an entire schism erupted when he answered the same question in two different ways.⁴⁰ One suspects that interested Shiites had a list of difficult questions they posed to every claimant to the imamate. In a letter preserved by al-Kashshī, al-Riḍā declares:

I have answered many, many questions, so you and whoever else wants to should examine [my answers] and consider them well. If you don't find relief [from doubt] there, [my obligation is finished, because] I have provided you with all the proof and lesson [you need]. Asking too many questions is shameful, in our view. Those who pose questions only want to test [me] and find a path to doubt and misbelief . . . Don't you and your crowd see that I respond to [your inquiries] when I can remain silent instead? [If I do] it is because I have the right to, not because of what you and your supporters say: namely, that I don't know [the answers]. However, I have no choice, because I know these matters for a certainty while you remain in doubt.⁴¹

If the *'Uyūn* is any guide, the skeptics who gave al-Riḍā the most trouble were the *wāqifa* ("those who stop"). One of Ibn Bābawayh's proofs, the so-called tablet of Fāṭima, alludes to a "blind and black calamity" that will arise over the succession to al-Kāẓim.⁴² The "calamity" is evidently the appearance of the *wāqifa*, whom the tablet calls "liars and deniers." This group, according to the heresiographers, believed that al-Riḍā's father al-Kāẓim was the last

³⁶ *UAR*, II: 75–77. The answers are (1) so that He would not be suspected of impotence; (2) because He had rendered all women barren for the forty years preceding the flood, and (3) the conversion was invalid because it occurred under duress.

³⁷ *UAR*, II: 81–82. Regarding the first question, the Imam answers that 'Alī had been so zealous in fighting the enemies of God that he alienated their surviving relatives; regarding the second, he answers that 'Alī modeled his conduct on that of the Prophet, who forbore attacking the Meccan polytheists until he could be assured of victory. The answer to the third question is uncharacteristically curt: "Because that's where God put it, and 'He is not to be asked about what He does'" (Qur'ān 21: 23). ³⁸ Kashshī, *Ikhtiyār*, 463.

³⁹ *UAR*, II: 209 (this is the Ibn Qiyāmā report, on which see below, p. 79).

⁴⁰ Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 73. ⁴¹ Kashshī, *Ikhtiyār*, 603. ⁴² *UAR*, I: 42–45.

Imam, or had never died at all.⁴³ In al-Kashshī’s report, the man who asks al-Riḍā directly if he is the Imam has first to be assured that the old Imam is “properly dead” (*maḍā mawtan*), as opposed to “disappeared.”⁴⁴ In the *‘Uyūn*, Ibn Bābawayh blames the appearance of the *wāqifa* on the greed of al-Kāzīm’s trustees, who denied his death so they could keep his property.⁴⁵ But as the *‘Uyūn* itself reveals, there were more principled reasons for doubting al-Riḍā. One such reason emerges in a report about al-Ḥusayn b. Qiyāmā, identified as “a leader of the *wāqifa*,” who asked permission to speak with al-Riḍā. Upon being admitted, he asked “Are you an Imam?” “Yes,” responded al-Riḍā, to which Ibn Qiyāmā retorted that he could prove the contrary. Al-Riḍā, we are told, sat silent for a long time, “scratching at the ground” with his staff. Finally he asked how Ibn Qiyāmā could prove this. The latter replied that Ja‘far al-Šādiq stipulated that every Imam must have children. Al-Riḍā, even at his advanced age, had none. Al-Riḍā “bowed his head longer than he had the first time,” and finally replied that God would soon grant him a heir. Of course, as the report goes on to relate, a son (the future Imam Muḥammad al-Taḳī) was born within the year.⁴⁶

This report, which appears to preserve a genuine memory of al-Riḍā’s confrontation with the *wāqifa*, also reveals how transmitters manipulated the evidence to make their case for his imamate. His immediate associates (two of whom narrate the report) evidently controlled access to him, probably with the intent of protecting him from awkward questions like this one. He may have given an unsatisfactory answer to this particular question on some occasion or other, the memory of which survives in this report of his discomfort. According to some skeptics, moreover, the infant who appeared in 195/810 was actually the son of one of al-Riḍā’s slaves.⁴⁷ If so, it may have been questions like Ibn Qiyāmā’s that prompted the Imam to adopt the child as his heir. Once he knew that an heir would appear (naturally or otherwise), the Imam could allow skeptics like Ibn Qiyāmā to question him, knowing that his answers could later serve as evidence of his foreknowledge. In retrospect, even his silences could be piously interpreted as moments during which he received inspired knowledge of the future, or debated the wisdom of revealing that knowledge to Ibn Qiyāmā. Finally, it is significant that Ibn Qiyāmā insisted

⁴³ See Shahrastānī, *Milāl*, 345–46, Nāshī, *Uṣūl*, 47–48, and Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 86–90, who adds that the *waqf*-position came in several variations. Some believed that al-Kāzīm escaped from prison and hid, others that he died but was resurrected, and others again that he died and will return at the end of time. Of this latter group, some considered al-Riḍā and the subsequent Imams to be al-Kāzīm’s representatives. Yet another faction held that he delegated one Muḥammad b. Bashīr and his successors to serve as Imams. See also Rajkowski, *Early Shī‘ism*, 616–18; Momen, *Introduction*, 56–57; E. Kohlberg, “Mūsā al-Kāzīm.”

⁴⁴ *Ikhtiyār*, 463.

⁴⁵ *UAR*, I: 112–14; 106. The tales of appropriated property conflict with al-Kāzīm’s reputation for poverty, and Ibn Bābawayh tries to explain away the discrepancy (*UAR*, I: 114). Al-Kāzīm probably had a substantial income: he is credited with regularizing the collection of the tithes (actually *khums*, a fifth of income) and benefactions paid to the Imam by his followers (Modarressi, *Crisis*, 12–15). ⁴⁶ *UAR*, II: 209–10.

⁴⁷ See Modarressi, *Crisis*, 62–63, note 38, and references cited.

on confronting al-Riḍā instead of ignoring him. His skepticism, like that of his contemporaries, does not appear malevolent. Rather, it came from a genuine desire to find and acknowledge the Imam of the age, and to protect the community from the danger of following an impostor.

The *wāqifa*'s other claim, namely that al-Kāẓim had never died, appears to have given al-Riḍā trouble as well. When he heard them claim that his father was still alive, he could do no more, it seems, than protest their assertions: "God Almighty! The Prophet died, but [al-Kāẓim] didn't!"⁴⁸ The appearance of an heir may have won back some of the *wāqifa*, as the story of Ibn Qiyāmā claims. Others, however, held out – as late as the 1950s, according to one account.⁴⁹ Ibn Bābawayh, in any event, speaks of them in the present tense, and felt it necessary to refute them. As we have seen, he adduces reports that accuse them of wanting to retain al-Kāẓim's property. Furthermore, he includes accounts of al-Kāẓim's death, with the explicit purpose of refuting those who think him still alive. These reports are worth a moment's notice, because they will serve as the models for two otherwise inexplicable stories about the death of al-Riḍā.

The reports Ibn Bābawayh cites agree that the Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓim was poisoned by the caliph al-Rashīd while under house arrest in Baghdad. In the reports, al-Kāẓim informs a group of Alid visitors that the caliph is going to poison him. However, he cannot die until he is fated to do so (when al-Rashīd uses the poison prematurely, he ends up poisoning his own dog). First, the Imam announces, he must travel to Medina to appoint his successor. He vanishes mysteriously from prison and makes the trip from Baghdad to Medina and back in a single night. Then he drinks doctored water, or eats tainted food, and dies. The Alid dignitaries who come to see the body find no trace of foul play. They are not fooled, because they heard him predict his own death. Then they wash, shroud, and bury the Imam. One of them is quoted as exclaiming: "How can they say he's alive when I buried him myself?!" Ibn Bābawayh comments: "I have only reproduced these reports in this book to refute those who declare [al-Kāẓim] the last Imam."

One difficulty, however, still remained. Ja'far al-Šādiq, the sixth Imam, had declared that only an Imam may wash his predecessor's corpse. At the time of al-Kāẓim's death in Baghdad, al-Riḍā was in Medina. Therefore, the *wāqifa* argued, al-Riḍā cannot have washed his father's corpse (from which it also follows, more or less, that al-Kāẓim cannot have died). This argument clearly gave Ibn Bābawayh some trouble. He begins by arguing that someone other than the new Imam may happen to wash the corpse, but this does not invali-

⁴⁸ *UAR*, I: 112–14; 106.

⁴⁹ Some modern scholars describe them as having disappeared into the Imami mainstream by the end of the third/ninth century (e.g., Kohlberg, "Mūsā," at 647). However, the group was still active at the beginning of the fourth/tenth century, when Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī attacked them in his *Tanbīh* (Arjomand, "Crisis," 505); and Madelung has found mention of them in the Maghrib in the 1950s ("Notes," 87–97; cited in Modarressi, *Crisis*, 61).

date the new Imam's position. Then he tries a new tack: "We have heard reports to the effect that al-Riḍā did wash [al-Kāzim's] corpse while remaining invisible to some of those who were assembled for that purpose." He hopes that this will settle the matter, since "[even] the *wāqifa* do not deny that God can fold the earth for the Imam and enable him to travel long distances in a short time."⁵⁰

If the struggle against the *wāqifa* is any guide, al-Riḍā owed the spread of his reputation not only to his own efforts but also to those of sympathetic eye-witnesses and transmitters.⁵¹ According to the *Firaq al-Shī‘a*, some of the *wāqifa* acknowledged him as Imam when "they saw him perform certain feats which convinced them." Others, however, "later came to believe the accounts of his companions and to trust their opinion of him, and so returned to the Imami doctrine."⁵² This passage implies many of the reports we find in the *‘Uyūn* first circulated in al-Riḍā's generation or the one immediately following, when persuasive reports of his imamate would have been most immediately needed. The *Firaq* does not say whether the accounts were put in circulation by al-Riḍā's companions, or merely attributed to them. Even so, the passage confirms that the Imam's reputation spread through the efforts of his associates.

Who precisely were these figures? The *‘Uyūn* tells us almost nothing about the men named in its *isnāds*, and the *rijāl*-works are almost equally laconic.⁵³ The *‘Uyūn* does, however, preserve a sense of the circumstances under which al-Riḍā's contemporaries came to believe in his cause. On the way to Marv, the Imam stopped at Nishapur. There he was mobbed by citizens seeking Ḥadīth. As Richard Bulliet has shown, the Nishapuris of later centuries regarded the study of Ḥadīth as a rite of passage and a mark of social distinction.⁵⁴ Their predecessors appear to have taken a similar interest in Ḥadīth, and to have considered al-Riḍā a privileged transmitter by virtue of his descent from the Prophet. In the one Ḥadīth actually quoted in the report, al-Riḍā relates the Prophet's promise of salvation to anyone who testifies to the oneness of God. By implication, it seems, al-Riḍā can promise the key to salvation to anyone who hears him recite this Ḥadīth. Perhaps not coincidentally, the Nishapuris attributed miraculous powers to al-Rida. When he planted an almond tree in his host's yard, people took the almonds as remedies for ophthalmia, birth pains, and animal colic. Similarly blessed were the pots made from a quarry where he had stopped, and a fountain from which he had drunk.⁵⁵ When he rode out of the city, a crowd of scholars reportedly clung to the reins of his mule and begged him for Ḥadīth.⁵⁶ Their reverence for "the Prophet's son" does not make the Nishapuris Shiites, much less proto-Twelve Imamis. But the fervid attachment to his memory there and elsewhere doubtless proved

⁵⁰ *UAR*, I: 95–108. ⁵¹ Cf. Modarressi, *Crisis*, 105. ⁵² Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 89.

⁵³ The most important exception is Abū al-Ṣalt al-Harawī, who will be discussed below.

⁵⁴ Bulliet, *Patricians*. ⁵⁵ *UAR*, II: 132–37; Scarcia Amoretti, "Interpretazione."

⁵⁶ *UAR*, II: 134.

conducive to the fabrication and acceptance of hagiographic reports like the ones in the *ʿUyūn*.

In the most strikingly mythographic of these reports, al-Riḍā's *ʿilm* balloons into comprehensive knowledge of all books and languages, as well as the ability to read minds and foretell the future. The transmitters of these reports used the topos of question-and-answer to construct tales in which the Imam defeats his interlocutor on the latter's ground, no matter what the subject. To impress an audience skeptical of his *ʿilm*, he uses the condensed, jargon-heavy style of the speculative theologians.⁵⁷ In a long debate held at the caliph's court at Marv, he refutes the Jewish Exilarch, the Nestorian Catholicos, and the dualist *mutakallim* ʿImrān al-Ṣābi' with citations from the Torah, the Gospels, and the Psalms, followed by a barrage of expertly constructed syllogisms.⁵⁸ Other reports credit him with knowing all languages, including Greek, Persian, and Slavonic.⁵⁹ Moreover, he can read minds, a power he demonstrates by reminding his visitors of questions or favors they forget to ask. He can also foretell future events, such as the civil war between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, the execution of the Abbasid general Harthama b. A'yan, and his own death by poison. He even knows when it will rain, and tells his companions to bring an umbrella (he himself stays dry despite the storm).⁶⁰ Stories like these present the Imam as more than a source of legal rulings for his Imami followers. Rather, he is a repository of knowledge of all kinds, and can therefore serve as the ideal representative of the entire Muslim community.

Ibn Bābawayh's willingness to admit miracle-stories like these was to earn him the censure of rationalist biographers.⁶¹ In his own day, however, his position was the skeptical one, in contradistinction to that of the so-called *ghulāh* and *mufawwiḍa*. Since the imamate of Ibn Abī Ṭālib, disagreements had reportedly broken out between those Shiites who venerated the Imam as a privileged interpreter of the law and those who revered him as a manifestation of divinity.⁶² Adherents of the former view accused the adherents of the latter of *ghuluww*, literally "exaggeration," referring to the ascription of divinity to the Imams.⁶³ Although the heresiographers' accounts of the early disputes are dubious, the debate itself was certainly current in Ibn Bābawayh's time. In his credal works, he condemns *ghuluww* as well as the cognate heresy of *tafwīd* (the view that the Imams maintained the world in God's place; but often used

⁵⁷ E.g., *VAR*, I: 150–53, where the Imam refutes *tashbīh*. Van Ess attributes al-Riḍā's "Mu'tazilism" to the intervention of his transmitters (*ThG*, III: 156–57). On Ibn Bābawayh's relationship with the Mu'tazila, see Madelung, "Imamism," 17.

⁵⁸ *UAR*, I: 154–78; see further Rajkowski, *Early Shi'ism*, 632–33. ⁵⁹ *UAR*, II: 227–28.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, II: 200–26.

⁶¹ By "miracle" in this chapter I mean *dalāla*, a change in the natural order effected by God as proof of al-Riḍā's imamate. Cf. p. 133, note 121. ⁶² See, e.g., Nawbakhti, *Firaq*, 32–33.

⁶³ Hodgson ("Early Shi'a") describes *ghuluww* as a term of abuse used by Twelvers for "any primitive Shi'ite speculation" that did not become a part of post-occultation doctrine. Ironically, many of the doctrines described as "exaggerated" later became standard (e.g., the cursing of the first caliphs). See further Buckley, "Early Shiite *Ghulāh*." On modern "ghulāh" sects, see Moosa, *Extremist Shi'ites*.

as a synonym for *ghuluww*).⁶⁴ As Hossein Modarressi has shown, however, many of the arguments associated with these movements, including the attribution of infallibility and omniscience to the Imams, did find their way into the scholarship of Qumm, where Ibn Bābawayh worked.⁶⁵

The text of the *‘Uyūn* reveals that certain “exaggerations” had indeed attached themselves indelibly to the Imam’s biography. Yet it is also clear that Ibn Bābawayh strove to head off any misapprehensions that might arise from them. He prefaces the chapter on thaumaturgy with al-Riḍā’s warning that wonders occur only because God responds to his prayers. After a story in which the Imam predicts the time of his uncle’s death, Ibn Bābawayh interjects a reminder that the Imam knew the life spans of the Alids only because the Prophet had written them down.⁶⁶ Similarly, certain reports appear calculated to show that the Imam’s knowledge of the future does not permit him to change it. In one case, a man who had seen the Prophet in a dream and been given a number of dates representing his remaining years of life asked al-Riḍā to give him a larger number of dates. The Imam refused: “Had the Prophet given you more, I would have as well.” When another man asked to be cured of gangrene, al-Riḍā healed his mouth but not his foot, comforting him with the thought that bearing pain is a virtue. The implication is that the man was destined to limp. Most dramatically, the Imam cannot avert his own murder.⁶⁷

Besides the comments he makes on the more misleading reports, Ibn Bābawayh lets al-Riḍā pronounce critiques of the “exaggerators” as they supposedly existed in his time. One such report takes on particular importance in light of the Imam’s eventual fate. The narrator tells the Imam that certain *ghulāh* “in the Sawād of Kufa” claim that the Imam al-Ḥusayn was never killed. Rather, he ascended to Heaven, leaving a double to die in his place. Al-Riḍā denies this vigorously. For one thing, the Prophet himself predicted the death of al-Ḥusayn. Furthermore:

By God, al-Ḥusayn certainly was killed. Not only that, but men better than he were killed as well, namely, the Commander of the Faithful [‘Alī] and his son al-Ḥasan. Not one of us goes unmurdered (*mā minnā illā maqtūlan*). I myself, by God, shall die by poison, assassinated by a certain someone. I know this because of the covenant vouchsafed me by the Prophet of God, who had it from Gabriel, who had it from God Almighty.⁶⁸

This report may be authentic: as R. P. Buckley has pointed out, the first known writings against *ghuluww* originate with contemporaries of the Imam.⁶⁹ On the other hand, later generations were so concerned with the matter that it is easy to imagine them putting their words in al-Riḍā’s mouth.

During his lifetime, al-Riḍā evidently subjected himself to captious questioning by followers and skeptics alike. As al-Kashshī’s letter indicates, the

⁶⁴ Fyze, *Shi‘ite Creed*, 100–5. ⁶⁵ Modarressi, *Crisis*, 19–51. ⁶⁶ *UAR*, II: 207.

⁶⁷ *UAR*, II: 200–26.

⁶⁸ *UAR*, II: 203–04. An allomorph of this claim is attributed to Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq; see Rajkowski, *Early Shi‘ism*, 609. ⁶⁹ Buckley, “Early Shiite *Ghulāh*,” 319.

Imam continued to answer questions even when he knew they were being asked only to test him. Moreover, the *ʿUyūn* lets us suspect that when the *wāqifa* insisted on an heir, he produced one. Part of al-Riḍā's success, then, consisted in admitting the legitimacy of the demands made of him, even by the skeptics. Yet he cannot have satisfied all his interlocutors: long after his death, some skeptics still questioned his imamate. In his own day, it seems, he could only cry out in exasperation when his contemporaries insisted that al-Kāẓim had never died. Later, however, transmitters evidently found or constructed narratives to affirm all the necessary Twelver positions. First, all the Imams except the twelfth had died; to claim otherwise was to be an "exaggerator." Second, al-Kāẓim had designated al-Riḍā as his heir and then died, with al-Riḍā washing his corpse. Al-Riḍā, moreover, had furnished independent proof of his imamate. He could answer any question he was posed, read minds, predict the future, and best any opponent in debate. Finally, he had produced an heir and thus fulfilled the remaining condition of the imamate. The widespread acceptance of these claims came about largely through the efforts of his transmitters, who appear to have been most active during or shortly after his imamate. In producing the definitive biography of the Imam, Ibn Bābawayh's *ʿUyūn* conceals the details of this process. Even so, it conveys a clear sense of the collaborative and cumulative nature of the Imami biographical project and thus of the sacred history of Twelver Shiism.

Abū al-Ṣalt al-Harawī and the death of the Imam

Al-Riḍā's designation as heir apparent evidently came as a surprise to the Imami community. The *ʿUyūn* records two cases in which he was asked why he had accepted it. In the first report, the irritated Imam replied that if Joseph could accept a post as master of Pharaoh's granaries, then he (al-Riḍā) could certainly accept the designation as successor to al-Ma'mūn. After all, Joseph was a prophet, while he himself is only an heir (*waṣī*). Further, al-Ma'mūn is a Muslim, while Pharaoh was a polytheist. In the second report, the questioner says: "People are wondering how you could accept the heir apparenancy given your renunciation of the world." The Imam reminds his interlocutor that he was threatened with death if he did not agree, and again makes the comparison to Joseph. He also hints that the accession will never come to pass: "I accepted this charge knowing that I would soon be relieved of it."⁷⁰

Accompanied by the caliph's representatives, al-Riḍā traveled from Medina to Basra, Ahwāz, and Fāris and then northeast to Nishapūr and Marv to accept the designation. The Twelver sources ascribe to al-Ma'mūn's messenger Rajā' b. al-Daḥḥāk an account of the Imam's constant prayer during the journey. Everywhere he stopped, people gathered around him to hear his Ḥadīth-reports and legal judgements.⁷¹ When he reached Marv, he was given the customary privileges of an heir apparent: a separate residence, a ceremo-

⁷⁰ *UAR*, II: 138–39.

⁷¹ *UAR*, II: 180–83.

nial guard (*shurṭa*), and a corps of bodyguards (*ḥaras*).⁷² A report ascribed to a slave woman, Ghadr (or ʿUdhr), offers a glimpse of the Imam's domestic life. Ghadr and her companions originally belonged to al-Ma'mūn: "We were in heaven in his palace, what with all the food and drink and perfume and dinars." Then, al-Ma'mūn gave her to al-Riḍā. "In his house," she reports, "I lost all the luxuries I had had. We had a forewoman who would wake us up at night and make us pray; that was the hardest thing for us. I kept hoping to leave his house." Although she eventually left, her stay at al-Riḍā's house evidently made an impression on her. Her grandson al-Ṣūlī remarks that "she would often ask about al-Riḍā." Then she would say:

I don't recall much about him except that I used to see him perfuming himself with incense of fine Indian sandalwood, and then putting on rose-water and musk. When he prayed the early morning prayer, he began as early as possible, then remained prostrate until the sun rose. Then he would see visitors, or ride out. No one could raise his voice in his house, no matter what; everyone would always speak in a low voice.⁷³

Understandably, the Imami community would have been eager to know what happened when al-Riḍā met al-Ma'mūn. However, the events of the heir apparen- cy took place far from the Imami centers in Iraq and the Ḥijāz.⁷⁴ Therefore, the community had to rely on reports transmitted by sympathetic witnesses in Marv. The most commonly cited witness is Abū al-Ṣalt ʿAbd al-Salām b. Ṣāliḥ al-Harawī (d. 236/851), who was reportedly living in Nishapur when the Imam's party stopped there on its way to Marv. From the *ʿUyūn*, it appears that he followed the Imam to the caliphal court, remained with him there during the heir apparen- cy, and then accompanied him on the ill-fated journey to Baghdad. This close association with the Imam presumably formed the basis for Abū al-Ṣalt's lost book *Wafāt al-Riḍā* ("The Death of al-Riḍā"), credited to him by al-Najāshī (d. 450/1058).⁷⁵ Pilgrims to al-Riḍā's shrine know Abū al-Ṣalt as the Imam's companion in his final hours, and still pay respectful visits to his tomb, which lies twelve kilometers outside Mashhad.⁷⁶

Given his indispensability as a transmitter of al-Riḍā's *akhbār*, Abū al-Ṣalt has been declared a reliable witness by most Shiite authorities. Upon closer inspection of his career, the need for insistence on this point becomes evident. According to non-Shiite reports, Abū al-Ṣalt was indeed present at Marv, but in his capacity as companion to the caliph al-Ma'mūn.⁷⁷ A well-known

⁷² For *dār al-Riḍā* see, e.g., *UAR* II: 240; on the guards, Ibn Ḥabīb, *Asmāʾ*, 201–2; on the privileges of the *walī al-ʿahd*, see Tyan, *Califat*, 267–86. ⁷³ *UAR* II: 179.

⁷⁴ Al-Riḍā refers to Tūs as *mawḍiʿ ghurba*, and exhorts pilgrims to "brave the distance" to visit his shrine (*UAR*, II: 254–55). On the difficulty of getting proper reports from Marv, see *ThG*, III: 155. Al-Ṣfahānī complains of a similar problem regarding the Ṭālibīs in general: eyewitnesses to flight, secrecy, and violent death are hard to come by (Günther, *Quellenuntersuchungen*, 18).

⁷⁵ Najāshī, *Rijāl*, 172. There is a late work of the same title by al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad ʿAlī ʿUṣfur al-Baḥrānī (Tihirānī, *Dharīʿa*, XXV: 119).

⁷⁶ Mu'tamin, *Rāhnamā*, 438; Hakami, *Pèlerinage*, 66.

⁷⁷ This account follows *TB*, XI: 47–52 (no. 5728); and *ThG*, III: 157–58. Note that Abū al-Ṣalt was *thiqatun ma'mūnun ʿalā ʿl-ḥadīth* ("reliable and trustworthy with Ḥadīth" (Kashshī, *Ikhtiyār*, 615)), not *thiqatu ʿl-Ma'mūni ʿalā ʿl-ḥadīth* (pace Rajkowski, *Early Shīʿism*, 628).

renunciant, he had gone to Marv to enlist in the frontier wars.⁷⁸ He reportedly impressed the caliph with his forensic skills, and remained in his favor “until [the caliph] decided to promulgate the opinions of Jahm and the createdness of the Qur’ān.”⁷⁹ The first proclamation of the *khalq al-Qur’ān* dates to 212/827, meaning that Abū al-Ṣalt probably returned to Baghdad with al-Ma’mūn and remained there at least until that time.⁸⁰

The reports of Abū al-Ṣalt’s activities in Baghdad depict him as well respected by prominent proto-Sunnis, perhaps because of his patronage of Ḥadīth-scholars (and his opposition to the dogma of the created Qur’ān). Yet he did have a fondness for reciting Ḥadīth of a Shiite cast, and many observers expressed reservations about him. One inquisitive transmitter reports finding him moderate in his views: “He gave precedence to Abū Bakr and ‘Umar, invoked mercy upon ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī, and said nothing but good about the Prophet’s Companions. But then there are those reports he would relate about [their] flaws” – presumably out of the narrator’s earshot. Such ambiguous testimony left a later generation of Shiite critics in a quandary. Al-Najāshī (d. 450/1058) called him a reliable transmitter, while al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067) labeled him a Sunni (‘*ammī*).⁸¹ Their Sunni counterparts saw him as a Shiite pure and simple, and attacked him with every derogatory epithet in their polemical lexicon.⁸² As if in response, subsequent Shiite critics affirmed his reliability, even to the point of citing his appearances in Ibn Bābawayh’s ‘*Uyūn* as evidence for his character.⁸³

In retrospect, Abū al-Ṣalt’s views clearly threatened the binary oppositions on which both Sunnis and Shiites founded their notions of reliability.⁸⁴ For their time, however, his opinions were hardly unique. Indeed, they are remarkably similar to those ascribed to al-Ma’mūn. Abū al-Ṣalt’s close relationship with the caliph suggests that he may have been among those associated with an evanescent “sect” called the *muḥadditha*. According to (pseudo?) al-Ḥasan al-Nawbakhtī (d. 310/922) and Sa’d b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Qummī (d. c. 300/912–13), this group consisted of “Murji’is and Ḥadīth-scholars” who endorsed the imamates of Mūsā al-Kāzīm and ‘Alī al-Riḍā. They reportedly did so in order to curry favor with al-Ma’mūn, and reverted to their former beliefs when al-Riḍā died.⁸⁵ In all probability, this “sect” is merely a label for

⁷⁸ Cf. *UAR* II: 134, where he reports leaving Nishapur with al-Riḍā.

⁷⁹ Abū al-Ṣalt apparently believed in an uncreated Qur’ān: he is described as successfully refuting representatives of the Jahmī position (*TB*, XI: 49; no. 5728).

⁸⁰ Al-Ma’mūn’s biographies do not mention him, except to cite him as the narrator in the following report. Abū al-Ṣalt once spent the night talking with al-Ma’mūn; when the lamp went out, the caliph rekindled it himself rather than wake the servants (*TB*, X: 186 [no. 5330]; *TMD*, XXXIX: 260). ⁸¹ Najāshī, *Rijāl*, 172; Ṭūsī, *Rijāl*, 380.

⁸² See the editor’s notes to al-Ṭūsī, *Rijāl*, 380. ⁸³ E.g., Khūṭ, *Mulakhkhas*, 49.

⁸⁴ He was thus described as *bayn al-farīqayn* (Scarcia Amoretti, “Interpretazione,” 51, note 3).

⁸⁵ Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 91; Madelung, *Imam al-Qāsim*, 78; *ThG*, III: 197, note 14, which proposes that they appeared in Kufa, where al-Riḍā’s brother served as governor. Presumably their endorsement of al-Kāzīm was retrospective, as there could have been no political advantage to advocating his imamate under al-Rashīd.

those of al-Ma’mūn’s subjects who perforce swore allegiance to al-Riḍā. Even so, the implied doctrinal position is perfectly plausible. In light of the nomination, a contemporary observer could easily conclude that both the caliph and his heir apparent were legitimate imams. Abū al-Ṣalt was not a Murjiʿī, but he was a Ḥadīth-scholar, and his position matches that ascribed to the *muḥadditha*. The Twelvers, of course, later rejected this position, but they could not reject Abū al-Ṣalt, who was their major source for information on al-Riḍā’s final months.

As will be evident from the examination of his testimony, it is difficult to reconstruct exactly what Abū al-Ṣalt’s opinions may have been. In Ibn Bābawayh’s *ʿUyūn*, he almost always appears as an unequivocal partisan of al-Riḍā’s imamate. One report, however, appears to preserve a memory of his conversion to Imamism. In a report he ostensibly narrated himself, Abū al-Ṣalt relates that he went to see al-Riḍā in Sarakhs. He had difficulty gaining access to the Imam, who was confined to his house and encumbered with fetters. When he finally managed to see him, Abū al-Ṣalt demanded an explanation for the rumor that the Imams thought of other men as their slaves. Al-Riḍā swore that the accusation was false: “If all men are slaves to us, as the rumor has it, then tell me where we would have bought them?” Then he asked: “Do you deny, as some do, that God has given us the *wilāya* (privilege of leadership)?” Abū al-Ṣalt replied: “God forbid! I acknowledge your *wilāya*.”⁸⁶ This report is dubious: there is no support for the claim that al-Riḍā was kept under arrest during the journey from Marv to Sarakhs.⁸⁷ Even so, it makes the plausible suggestion that Abū al-Ṣalt, like many of al-Riḍā’s contemporaries, insisted on testing him to find out whether he was the Imam. According to this report, in any event, he was persuaded (although of what precisely is not clear; *wilāya* is less straightforward a term than *imāma*).⁸⁸

Given Abū al-Ṣalt’s doctrinal ambiguity, one might suspect that his reports would leave something to be desired from the Twelver point of view. Indeed, his testimony – in its original form, at any rate – clearly proved unsatisfactory to the Twelvers. This is evident from a comparison of the two recensions that preserve it. The first appears in the *Maqātil* of al-Iṣfahānī, who used it, along with other reports, to tell the story of al-Riḍā’s nomination and his untimely death.⁸⁹ Al-Iṣfahānī may not have transmitted Abū al-Ṣalt’s testimony word for word, but he may be presumed innocent of lending it a Twelver cast: his own orientation was Zaydī, not Twelver, Shiite. The other recension of Abū al-Ṣalt’s testimony appears in Ibn Bābawayh’s *ʿUyūn*, where it resoundingly affirms the Twelver point of view. Interestingly, neither al-Iṣfahānī nor Ibn Bābawayh refer to the book Abū al-Ṣalt reportedly wrote about al-Riḍā. Instead, each cites various and non-overlapping sets of transmitters back to

⁸⁶ *UAR*, II: 183–84. ⁸⁷ But cf. appendix on the ill-will of his *shurta*.

⁸⁸ On the role of skepticism in the construction of sainthood, see Kleinberg, *Prophets*, esp. 21–70.

⁸⁹ Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 374–80.

him.⁹⁰ A comparison of the two recensions of Abū al-Ṣalt's testimony shows that his reports, but not his book, enjoyed wide dissemination. Moreover, his original testimony – at least as preserved in al-İṣfahānī – was not at all unfavorable to al-Ma'mūn.

Omitting for the moment the testimony attributed to Abū al-Ṣalt, al-İṣfahānī's account of the designation and death of al-Riḍā runs as follows. Al-Ma'mūn vowed that if he won the civil war, he would appoint the worthiest of the Alids to succeed him. The viziers al-Faḍl and al-Ḥasan b. Sahl remonstrated with him, but eventually agreed to support the plan.⁹¹ Al-Riḍā was brought to Marv, but declined the offer. He resisted the threats offered by the viziers, capitulating only when al-Ma'mūn invoked the example of the caliph 'Umar, who had ordered the beheading of anyone who disputed the community's choice of successor. After the ceremony of allegiance, al-Riḍā fell ill, apparently poisoned. One report alleges that the Banū Sahl feared that he would denounce them to the caliph. Another report suggests that the caliph came to resent al-Riḍā when the latter admonished him for allowing a servant to pour the water for his ritual ablution.

Both of al-İṣfahānī's reports of the poisoning itself depict the caliph as the culprit. In the first, a servant relates that al-Ma'mūn ordered him to let his nails grow, and then asked him to knead "something resembling tamarinds." Later, the caliph visited al-Riḍā, called for pomegranates, and told the servant to squeeze them. Al-Riḍā drank the juice and died two days later, presumably poisoned by a toxic residue that passed from the servant's nails into the juice. According to the second account, the caliph had needles placed in the stems or stalks of grapes and left for a few days. Al-Riḍā, who was fond of grapes, ate some of the tainted fruit during his illness and died. Al-Ma'mūn kept his

⁹⁰ Al-İṣfahānī cites three chains, of which at least one appears to be from a book (also called *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyīn*) by Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Ḥamza (d. 287/900). However, the link between Muḥammad b. 'Alī and Abū al-Ṣalt is vague (*balaghanī 'an*). Of the other two links, one is equally vague; only the third appears to represent direct oral transmission (*ḥaddathanā*). On al-İṣfahānī's immediate sources see Günther, *Quellenuntersuchungen*, 127–29 (Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Sa'īd), 170–72 (al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī al-Khaḥāf) and 190–91 (Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Ḥamza). The latter is credited with a *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyīn*; al-İṣfahānī refers to the transmission using *dhakara*, which indicates a written source (on types of transmission see Günther, *Quellenuntersuchungen*, 100–09). Al-Najāshī calls Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Ḥamza "reliable, a source of Ḥadīth, and doctrinally correct" (*Rijāl*, 245). For his part, Ibn Bābawayh mentions no written works at all. One of his *isnāds* runs through three generations of the Abnā' Ḥāshim, a family of attested transmitters, but the name of the person who probably heard from Abū al-Ṣalt himself appears to have disappeared. Another runs from Abū al-Ṣalt to an attested transmitter of al-Riḍā's *akhbār*, but then through two generations of unattested Abnā' Tamīm, of Quraysh, who are also responsible for transmitting a spurious death-tale attributed to Harthama b. A'yan (see below, p. 95). Finally, Ibn Bābawayh does not mention al-İṣfahānī's work, although it is likely to have been completed by the time he wrote the *ʿUyūn*, and is cited in the work of his younger contemporary al-Shaykh al-Mufīd.

⁹¹ A relatively early source claims that al-Ḥasan was a *mawlā* (affiliate) of al-Riḍā, and sent him a question about *tashbīh*. Jahshiyārī, *Nuṣūṣ*, 54–55, following Radī al-Dīn b. Ṭāwūs, *Faraj*, 139–40. Even so, it appears that the viziers disapproved of the nomination. See Gabrieli, *Ma'mūn*, 32ff.; Sourdél, *Vizirat*, II: 207–08; Madelung, "New Documents," 38; Rekaya, "Ma'mūn," at VI: 334.

death a secret for twenty-four hours and then displayed the body to a group of Alid relatives to show them that no violence had been done to the Imam. The account ends with two dirges for al-Riḍā. The first is vaguely worded, but the second, by Dī‘bil b. ‘Alī al-Khuzā‘ī (d. 246/861), denounces the Abbasid caliphs and then asks whether al-Riḍā was poisoned. Dī‘bil is not sure, but thinks that a natural death is too suspiciously convenient.⁹²

Interwoven with the foregoing account, we find four pieces of testimony attributed to Abū al-Ṣalt al-Harawī. The first affirms the caliph’s Alid sympathies. In conversation with Abū al-Ṣalt, he remarks that “his Abū Bakr” – that is, his successor – is unlike the Abū Bakr of the *‘amma* (the non-Shiites). The second report indicates that al-Riḍā was poisoned. It has him take to his bed and say: “Abū al-Ṣalt! They’ve done it!” The third report declares the caliph innocent of involvement in the poisoning. Speaking to al-Riḍā on his deathbed, he declares: “It is hard for me, my brother, to have lived to see your last day, for there was hope that you might live. But even harder and more painful for me is that people will say I poisoned you – but I am innocent before God of that!” Al-Riḍā replies, “You are right, Commander of the Believers; by God, you are innocent.” The fourth and last report attributed to Abū al-Ṣalt depicts al-Ma’mūn as persuaded that a miracle would occur at the Imam’s grave. He orders him to be buried next to al-Rashīd, and recalls his deathbed prediction that his grave would fill with water. When the grave is dug, the water indeed appears, with fish swimming in it, then dries up.⁹³

Al-Isfahānī’s account in the *Maqātil* suggests two things. First, rumors that the caliph had poisoned al-Riḍā became current soon after the latter’s death.⁹⁴ Second, Abū al-Ṣalt al-Harawī was not the source of them. Three of his reports depict the caliph as cognizant of al-Riḍā’s virtue, and one specifically denies (in the words of the Imam himself) that he is innocent of poisoning his heir apparent. Had Abū al-Ṣalt provided any evidence for the caliph’s guilt, one of al-Isfahānī’s sources for his testimony would doubtless have cited it. Admittedly, Abū al-Ṣalt appears to believe someone poisoned al-Riḍā. But he does not say who (or, if he did, that part of the testimony has not reached us). Al-Isfahānī appears to have taken this evidence – or lack of evidence – seriously. In his preface, he says that al-Ma’mūn conferred the succession upon al-Riḍā, “then contrived to poison him, or so it is said.” In a book devoted to the

⁹² *Wa-ayyuhmā? Mā qulta? In qulta sharbatun . . . / Wa-in qulta mawtun innahu la-qamīnu* (Isfahānī, *Maqātil*, 380). If it is genuinely contemporary, this poem establishes that rumors of poison began immediately upon al-Riḍā’s death, but even his supporters were uncertain whether they were true.

⁹³ Before citing this report, al-Isfahānī says he has reached the end of the tale of ‘Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā. However, it seems he told one more story which his amanuenses – Ibrāhīm b. Aḥmad al-Ṭabarī (d. 393/1002) and ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Ḥusayn al-Fārisī – added to their notes. See Günther, *Quellenuntersuchungen*, 17.

⁹⁴ This impression is corroborated by ‘Abd Allāh b. Mūsā’s reply when al-Ma’mūn asked him to accept the heir appanage after al-Riḍā’s death. The Alid refused, saying: “Do you think I haven’t heard what you did to al-Riḍā?” Later he mentions “the poisoned grapes you killed him with” (Isfahānī, *Maqātil*, 416–17).

wrongful deaths of the Alids, any reservation about the caliph's guilt is significant.

If Abū al-Ṣalt thought al-Ma'mūn innocent, he was not the only Shiite (or philo-Alid) to do so. Al-Ya'qūbī, for example, suggests that al-Riḍā was poisoned by 'Alī b. Hishām, a prominent Khurasani supporter of the Abbasids.⁹⁵ Y. Marquet, who considers al-Ya'qūbī "a fanatical Shiite," regards him as favoring the caliph's innocence, and takes this to have been the contemporary Shiite view.⁹⁶ The philo-Alid historian al-Mas'ūdī cites evidence for al-Ma'mūn's Shiite leanings, notes his kindness toward al-Riḍā, and mentions both surfeit and poison as possible causes of the Imam's death.⁹⁷ Most significantly, perhaps, an early Imami authority says nothing to suggest that al-Riḍā was murdered by the caliph or anyone else. This is al-Kulaynī (or al-Kulīnī, d. 328/939–40 or 329/940–41), compiler of *al-Kāfi*, a voluminous collection of the *āthār* of the Imams. The *Kāfi* contains murder-stories for other Imams, including a poison-tale about Mūsā al-Kāẓim. But in his remarks on al-Riḍā, al-Kulaynī states simply that "when al-Ma'mūn set off for Baghdād, he brought [al-Riḍā] with him, and he passed away in that village," i.e., Sanābād, in Ṣafar 203, at the age of fifty-five.⁹⁸

Abū al-Ṣalt and Ibn Bābawayh

By the time Ibn Bābawayh took up the matter of al-Riḍā's designation and death in the *ʿUyūn*, Shiite sentiment had evidently hardened. In his *Risālat al-i'tiqādāt al-imāmiya*, a treatise on the Twelver creed, the biographer declares it a matter of faith to believe that the Prophet Muḥammad and all the Imams but the last had been murdered. The Prophet was poisoned, 'Alī was assassinated, and al-Ḥusayn fell in battle. 'Alī's son al-Ḥasan was poisoned, as were the rest of the Imams except the last. To deny any of this, he says, is to contradict the Imams' own declarations on the matter, and is tantamount to renouncing Islam. In the *Risāla*, this argument has the explicit purpose of rebutting the *ghulāh* and the *mufawwiḍa*, who ascribed immortality to particular Imams.⁹⁹ In the *ʿUyūn*, as we have seen, Ibn Bābawayh gives al-Riḍā an opportunity to affirm that all the Imams have died or will die unnatural deaths.¹⁰⁰ In that context, the argument appears to be serving as a retort not only to the *ghulāh* but also to the *wāqifa*, whose claim that al-Kāẓim was still alive amounted to a declaration that he was immortal.

But why murder? To refute the *ghulāh* as well as the *wāqifa*, a natural death

⁹⁵ Ya'qūbī, *Ta'riḫh*, II: 550–51.

⁹⁶ Marquet, "Ši'isme," at II: 138 and II: 127. Cf. Millward, "Al-Ya'qūbī's Sources."

⁹⁷ *MDh*, IV: 5; cf. IV: 28.

⁹⁸ Kulaynī, *Uṣūl*, I: 259 (al-Kāẓim), I: 486 (al-Riḍā). The verbs used to describe al-Riḍā's death are *tuwuffiya* and *qubida*, both suggesting natural causes.

⁹⁹ Fyzee, *Shi'ite Creed*, 101–03.

¹⁰⁰ *UAR*, II: 203–04. He does not say "except for the last," suggesting that the report is genuine, or at least older than the formation of Twelver dogma.

on the Imam's part should serve just as well as death by foul play. The well-attested assassinations of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib and al-Ḥusayn obviously set a precedent, but still cannot explain the insistence, sometimes on the basis of very tenuous evidence, that eleven of the twelve Imams were murdered. Natural causes, it appears, could not generate a sufficiently convincing or memorable death-certificate. As we have seen in the case of the frightened caliphal biographer al-ʿAbdī, stories that purport to reveal scandal are for some reason more readily accepted than reports that argue for plausible but unspectacular solutions. As a literary device, moreover, murder-stories are more effective as proof of decease than tales of natural death. Because they concentrate on the question of the murderer's identity, they leave no opportunity to ask whether a murder was actually committed at all. Finally, the murder-doctrine forces the interpretation of an Imam's death into a misleading binary form: either the caliph murdered the Imam, or no one did.¹⁰¹ This way of putting the question overlooks the possibility that, if the Imam were indeed murdered, someone other than the caliph is guilty. In the case of al-Riḍā, al-Yaʿqūbī's early and plausible suggestion that ʿAlī b. Hishām poisoned him without the caliph's knowledge or consent (as the account implies) was never entertained, or even mentioned, by the biographers.¹⁰²

Helpful as the murder-doctrine might have been in some respects, it left Ibn Bābawayh with the task of explaining why the caliph designated al-Riḍā in the first place. He cites evidence for various explanations, and declares that he favors one report above the rest.¹⁰³ The report, a less elaborate version of which appears in al-Isfahānī's *Maqātil*, has the caliph explain that he appointed al-Riḍā because of a vow he made in the darkest hour of the civil war. His half-brother al-Amīn had sent an army to bring him to Baghdad in chains, his general Harthama failed to subdue Sijistān and Kirmān, and an insurrection threatened Khurasan. Besieged and penniless, al-Ma'mūn says he turned despairing to God. "I vowed to Him a solemn vow, with sincere intent, that if He granted me the caliphate and saved me from all these disasters, I would place the charge where God had placed it." Al-Ma'mūn's fortunes immediately took a turn for the better. "So when God did what I had asked Him to do, I wanted to fulfill my part of the bargain; and I found no one worthier of the charge than al-Riḍā."¹⁰⁴

This report depicts al-Ma'mūn as believing that the imamate properly belonged to the descendants of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib. Given what the non-Twelve sources tell us about al-Ma'mūn, this is plausible enough. Even so, Twelver transmitters felt inspired to elaborate on the matter. This is evident from a number of related reports also cited in the *ʿUyūn*. In one, al-Ma'mūn recalls that his father al-Rashīd once described al-Kāẓim as the true ruler of the Muslims. "But isn't that you?" asked al-Ma'mūn. His father replied: "I am the leader of the community in appearance, by force of strength and coercion; but

¹⁰¹ So, e.g., Crone, *Slaves*, 258, note 606.

¹⁰² See appendix.

¹⁰³ *UAR* II: 166.

¹⁰⁴ *UAR*, II: 151–52.

[al-Kāzim] is the true Imam.”¹⁰⁵ In another report, al-Ma’mūn makes a full confession of the Alid creed before an audience of Ḥadīth-scholars and theologians (*jamā ‘a min ahl al-ḥadīth wa-jamā ‘a min ahl al-naẓar*). He begins by arguing that because Ḥadīth reports are contradictory, some must be false. The only criterion for judging a Ḥadīth should be “the referential content of the report itself (*dalīl al-khabar fī nafsihī*).” After this eye-opening bit of reasoning, he demolishes a long series of reports claiming virtues for Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. Using a combination of syllogism and scriptural citation, he then argues for the necessary character of the imamate in the abstract, and for the imamate of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib in particular.¹⁰⁶ These two reports contain no allusion to what the ‘*Uyūn* will soon describe as the caliph’s betrayal of al-Riḍā. The absence of any condemnation of al-Ma’mūn implies that they were put into circulation by transmitters convinced of his sincerity. In a third case, a transmitter appears to have taken a report favorable to the caliph and appended to it a spurious declaration of his bad faith. In the report, al-Ma’mūn hears al-Riḍā refute *ghuluww* and declares: “Correct knowledge is only to be found among the members of this house, and you are the heir of that ancestral knowledge.” After the session, the narrator congratulates the Imam for having won over the caliph. “Don’t be deceived,” replies the Imam, confiding that al-Ma’mūn will eventually poison him.¹⁰⁷ If we omit the coda, this report, like the others just cited, affirms that al-Ma’mūn recognized, or at least made a show of recognizing, the legitimate claims of the Alids.

Ironically, this concession made it all the easier for later transmitters to argue that he betrayed al-Riḍā precisely because he recognized him as the Imam. Even more ironically, the eyewitness credited with this interpretation is none other than Abū al-Ṣalt al-Harawī. In the ‘*Uyūn*, Ibn Bābawayh has Abū al-Ṣalt report a conversation that supposedly took place between the caliph and the Imam. Al-Ma’mūn says to al-Riḍā: “I have recognized your knowledge, virtue, asceticism, scrupulosity, and piety, and I deem you worthier of the caliphate than myself.” Al-Riḍā replies: “If the caliphate is yours and if God made it so, then it is wrong for you to strip off something God has imposed on you and place it on someone else. And if the caliphate is not yours, then it is wrong for you to give me something that does not belong to you.” Seeing that he cannot persuade the Imam, al-Ma’mūn offers to make him heir apparent instead. Al-Riḍā replies with a prediction of his own fate, transmitted from the Prophet: “I will die before you, foully murdered by poison, with the angels of heaven and earth weeping over me. I will be buried in a foreign land, next to Hārūn al-Rashīd.” The caliph protests, asking who would dare commit such a crime; but al-Riḍā refuses to tell him. Al-Ma’mūn then accuses al-Riḍā of refusing the designation to enhance his reputation for pious renunciation of the world. The Imam shoots back with the accusation that the

¹⁰⁵ *UAR*, I: 88–93. ¹⁰⁶ *UAR*, II: 185–200.

¹⁰⁷ *UAR*, II: 202. A report of similar purport is attributed (II: 239) to Abū al-Ṣalt al-Harawī by the same set of transmitters (Tamīm-‘Abd Allāh-Aḥmad al-Anṣārī).

caliph has appointed him to achieve precisely the opposite effect. Frustrated, al-Ma’mūn threatens to kill him if he does not accept. The Imam, recalling the Qur’ānic injunction against choosing death, submits, on the condition that he serve only as an advisor.¹⁰⁸

In a second report, the narrator asks Abū al-Ṣalt the critical question. “How could al-Ma’mūn bring himself to murder al-Riḍā after having shown such esteem and affection for him, and making him his successor?” Abū al-Ṣalt replies:

Al-Ma’mūn honored him because he knew what virtue al-Riḍā possessed. He made him his successor to show people that al-Riḍā was ambitious after all, so their affection for him would vanish. But when everything that happened only made people love and esteem al-Riḍā all the more, al-Ma’mūn brought in the theologians from far and wide to refute al-Riḍā and thus diminish his standing among scholars and reveal his frailty to the common people. However, al-Riḍā refuted every opponent – Jewish, Christian, Magian, Sabeian, Hindu, atheist, materialist, or Muslim from whatever dissident sect – and compelled him to accept his proofs.

The people said, “He is worthier of the caliphate than al-Ma’mūn.” The caliph learned of this, and grew wrathful and envious. In the meantime, al-Riḍā arrogated none of the caliph’s privileges, and would obey the caliph’s wishes whenever he could. Yet this only increased the caliph’s resentment. The caliph showed nothing; but when nothing else would do, he murdered al-Riḍā with poison.¹⁰⁹

Taken together, the reports ascribed to Abū al-Ṣalt portray the caliph as acting in precisely the way his supposed Alid sympathies would dictate, but only up to a point. He offers to abdicate in the Imam’s favor, but his good intentions evaporate when al-Riḍā proves less pliant than he had anticipated. Even as they condemn al-Ma’mūn, the reports also protect the Imam from any suspicion of collusion with him. Al-Riḍā states his objections to the designation forthrightly, submits only under duress, and continues to prove his possession of superior *ilm*. To the extent that all of these predications are plausible, not only in themselves but also as opinions Abū al-Ṣalt is likely to have held, the reports may well contain some authentically old material. Unfortunately, none of the reports matches any part of the testimony we have seen ascribed to Abū al-Ṣalt by al-Iṣfahānī in the *Maqātil*.

A similar alteration of Abū al-Ṣalt’s testimony is apparent in Ibn Bābawayh’s account of the murder itself. The *‘Uyūn* adduces four separate accounts of it.¹¹⁰ The first states that al-Ma’mūn ordered a servant to knead a poisonous substance and then prepare pomegranate juice for al-Riḍā. Al-Riḍā, who was already ill, drank the juice and subsequently died, the caliph making a show of grief over him. This report is substantially the same as that cited in al-Iṣfahānī’s *Maqātil*, albeit with an entirely different chain of transmission.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ *UAR*, II: 139–40.

¹⁰⁹ *UAR*, II: 239; cf. II: 172–74.

¹¹⁰ *UAR*, II: 240–50.

¹¹¹ This story suggests that Ibn Bābawayh did not have either *Maqātil* book (al-Iṣfahānī’s or Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamza’s) available to him; if he had, he would certainly have cited the servant’s first-person report as confirmation of this secondhand one.

In the second report, Yāsir al-Khādim relates that the Imam fell ill and fainted before reaching Tūs. The caliph arrived at his bedside “barefoot, bare-headed, beating his head, clutching his beard, sighing, and weeping, with the tears flowing down his cheeks.” He wondered aloud which was worse: the loss of al-Riḍā, or the people’s suspicions that he – the caliph – had poisoned him. At some point during the night, the Imam died. The next morning, true to the caliph’s prediction, people gathered and accused him of murdering “the son of the Prophet of God.” Al-Ma’mūn asked al-Riḍā’s uncle to announce that al-Riḍā would not be coming out that day. The crowd, tricked into believing that the Imam was still alive, dispersed. This report has much to recommend it. Its narrator, Yāsir al-Khādim, was an attested companion of al-Riḍā, and his testimony accords with the accounts of al-Ya‘qūbī and al-Ṭabarī. Unfortunately, it nowhere states that al-Riḍā was murdered, or that the caliph ever had the intention of harming him.

Ibn Bābawayh obviously considered these two reports sufficiently suggestive to merit inclusion in the *‘Uyūn*. Yet he was not satisfied with them, and appended two more stories, both of which declare the caliph guilty of poisoning his heir. In the first of these, Abū al-Ṣalt al-Harawī recounts that al-Riḍā foretold his own death and entrusted him with instructions to be followed at his gravesite. When al-Ma’mūn offered the Imam some grapes, he ate three, tossed away the bunch, and rose. “Where are you going?” the caliph asked. “To the place where you have sent me,” replied al-Riḍā, and took to his bed. Abū al-Ṣalt, keeping watch outside the door, was accosted by a young man who identified himself as Muḥammad, al-Riḍā’s son and successor, transported from Medina and through the locked doors of al-Riḍā’s house. Muḥammad ordered Abū al-Ṣalt to accompany him into al-Riḍā’s room. There the future Imam greeted his father, licked the foam from his lips, and extracted from his chest “something like a bird,” which he swallowed. Al-Riḍā then died, and Muḥammad ordered Abū al-Ṣalt to fetch various items from a storeroom, all of which had never been there before: a wash-basin, a basket containing al-Riḍā’s shroud, and al-Riḍā’s coffin. After Muḥammad performed the last rites over his father’s body, the coffin flew up through the roof and disappeared. A few moments later, the roof opened again and al-Riḍā’s corpse (presumably a simulacrum) reappeared unwashed and unshrouded. Muḥammad then commanded Abū al-Ṣalt to open the door for al-Ma’mūn, who entered weeping. The burial proceeded as al-Riḍā had predicted. Water appeared in the grave, and fish appeared in the water; then a larger fish appeared and consumed the smaller ones. A vizier explained to the caliph: “Al-Riḍā is telling you that your Abbasid kingdom, for all its greatness and long life, is like these fish. When your time runs out and your dynasty has run its course, God will send one of [the Alids] to overpower and annihilate you.” Al-Ma’mūn, who had already admitted that al-Riḍā must be an Imam, assented to this interpretation. He asked Abū al-Ṣalt to repeat certain words he had spoken during the burial, but the latter could no longer remember them. The caliph assumed that he was

hiding something and ordered him to be imprisoned. A year later, we find Abū Ṣālt in prison, praying to God in the name of the Prophet and his family to free him. Muḥammad the Imam then appears, breaks his chains, marches him out of prison, and tells him that he is safe from al-Ma’mūn. “And in fact,” concludes Abū al-Ṣālt, “I have not seen al-Ma’mūn since.”¹¹²

This “novelistic” account (as Stefan Leder might call it) apparently inspired the fourth and final murder-story, which is cleverly designed to dispel any remaining doubts about al-Riḍā’s death. According to this report, al-Riḍā summoned the narrator, Harthama b. A‘yan, and announced: “That tyrant has resolved to poison me using grapes and crushed pomegranates.” He then conveyed a series of instructions for Harthama, who spent the next day as anxious “as a seed in a frying pan.” When the caliph called for grapes and pomegranates, Harthama could not bring himself to watch the scene. He retreated to his lodgings where, at sunset, he heard al-Riḍā returning. Doctors and attendants were coming and going, and Harthama was told that al-Riḍā had been taken ill. “The people had their suspicions, but I knew what had happened because of what he had told me.” At some point during the night, wailing broke out to announce the death of al-Riḍā, and al-Ma’mūn himself appeared in mourning attire. The next day, everything took place as al-Riḍā had predicted. The caliph wanted to wash the body, but Harthama warned him off. A white tent then appeared in the courtyard; Harthama carried the Imam’s body inside, then emerged to wait. When the caliph taunted him with the claim that only an Imam can wash the corpse of an Imam, Harthama replied that the next Imam was indeed present, hidden inside the tent. Then the tent was struck, revealing the shrouded body of al-Riḍā. All efforts to dig a grave failed until Harthama struck at the earth with a spade, at which point the grave dug itself. The grave filled with water, and a large fish appeared and thrashed about. When the water subsided, the Imam was lowered into his grave, which closed by itself.

To understand the odd features of these two reports, we must look back to the dispute over al-Riḍā’s imamate. In the controversy that followed al-Kāẓim’s death, partisans of his continuing imamate claimed that he had never died. As we have seen, al-Riḍā’s partisans responded with detailed accounts of al-Kāẓim’s demise. For maximum polemical utility, these accounts had to include several elements. First, the murderer (in this case al-Rashīd) must declare his intention to do away with the Imam. Second, the Imam must predict his imminent death, preferably with a reference to the exact manner in which it will be effected. Third, the murderer must endeavor to conceal his crime, the implication being that anyone who doubts the story has fallen for the deception. Finally, the new Imam must arrive to wash his father’s corpse. In his defense of al-Riḍā’s imamate, Ibn Bābawayh related tales of al-Kāẓim’s

¹¹² Here the “transmitters” slipped up: the historical Abū al-Ṣālt traveled back to Baghdad with the caliph and remained in his entourage for nine more years.

death clearly designed to fulfill precisely these requirements. When, in turn, al-Riḍā died, his followers were evidently prepared for a similar outbreak of *waqf*. To anticipate possible skepticism, they evidently constructed a series of death-tales to make all the same polemical points about al-Riḍā that they had learned to make about his father. Just as the older reports did for al-Kāẓim, these accounts establish that al-Riḍā is truly dead, that another Imam has succeeded him, and that his successor appeared to perform his funeral rites.¹¹³

To make the accusation against al-Ma'mūn as damning as possible, the transmitters of the fourth report chose an *'ammī* (non-Shiite) narrator, Harthama b. A'yan. To make their story corroborate the accounts we know from the *Maqātil*, or ones similar to them, they added poisoned pomegranates to Abū al-Ṣalt's grapes. They also inserted yet another dig at the *wāqifa*: now it is al-Ma'mūn who complacently declares that only an Imam can wash the corpse of another Imam. Furthermore, they appear to have tried to make the story square with Abū al-Ṣalt's. In the tale ascribed to him, Abū al-Ṣalt does not hear about the poisoning in advance, but he witnesses it. Harthama, on the other hand, hears a prediction of the poisoning, but does not see it. Similarly, Harthama is forbidden to peek into the tent while Muḥammad washes al-Riḍā's corpse, while Abū al-Ṣalt is asked to assist. This complementarity breaks down only at the gravesite. Either Abū al-Ṣalt presided over the burial, or Harthama did. The events in the stories do not admit of their both being present at the same time.

For all their cleverness, the fabricators of the fourth report give themselves away with the attribution. The historical Harthama b. A'yan (d. 201/816) was a prominent military commander under al-Rashīd and al-Ma'mūn. Given his vigorous prosecution of the war against Abū al-Sarāyā's Alid insurrectionists in Kufa, Harthama is hardly likely to have had any sympathy for Alids and their causes.¹¹⁴ Worse yet, he died some two years before al-Riḍā. Oddly enough, Ibn Bābawayh was aware of this: elsewhere in the *Uyūn*, he adduces as proof of al-Riḍā's imamate his prediction that Harthama would soon be beheaded in Marv.¹¹⁵ Why then was Harthama chosen to narrate this story? The reason is evidently that he too died under suspicious circumstances in Marv. According to al-Ṭabarī, Harthama was planning to inform the caliph of the crisis in Iraq. Fearing the consequences of such a revelation, the vizier al-Faḍl b. Sahl denounced Harthama first, accusing him of collusion with the Alid rebel Abū al-Sarāyā. When Harthama arrived in Marv, al-Ma'mūn ordered him to be beaten, dragged away, and imprisoned. A few days later he was murdered at al-Faḍl's behest.¹¹⁶ Thus, by a kind of strange logic,

¹¹³ In the event, the dispute that broke out after al-Riḍā's death was of a different nature altogether. His son al-Taḳī (also called al-Jawād) was only seven years old at the time of his father's death, and some thought him too young to be an Imam. His partisans argued successfully that Imamic *'ilm* was hereditary and innate, not acquired. Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 92–93; Modarressi, *Crisis*, 62–64; Arjomand, "Crisis," 496–97; *ThG*, III: 197. ¹¹⁴ *TRM*, VIII: 534–35.

¹¹⁵ *UAR*, II: 210. ¹¹⁶ *TRM*, VIII: 542–43; Jahshiyārī, *Wuzarā'*, 315–18.

Harthama gained a reputation for having died a martyr to the Alid cause, and became a plausible transmitter of pro-Riḍā tales.¹¹⁷

What about the narrator of the third tale, the ubiquitous Abū al-Ṣalt al-Harawī? As we have seen, the fables attributed to him in the *ʿUyūn* are a far cry from the testimony ascribed to him in the *Maqātil*. In some cases, he becomes the narrator of reports originally credited to others. For example, al-Iṣfahānī cites 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn or Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Sa'īd to the effect that al-Ma'mūn bullied al-Riḍā into accepting the nomination. In the *ʿUyūn*, however, it is Abū al-Ṣalt who makes this claim. In other cases, one element of his original testimony serves as the basis for an elaborate legend. An example is the brief miracle-report ascribed to him in the *Maqātil*, where water and a fish appear in the Imam's grave. The *ʿUyūn*-version is much more elaborate, with the additions consisting largely of the three necessary constituents of imamic death-tales: prediction, caliphal culpability, and corpse-washing by the successor.¹¹⁸ In one case, finally, the transmitters dropped part of his testimony: his report that al-Riḍā declared al-Ma'mūn innocent is nowhere to be found in the *ʿUyūn*.¹¹⁹

Who did all this to Abū al-Ṣalt? In theory, he could have done it to himself. He survived al-Riḍā by thirty-three years (and al-Ma'mūn by eighteen), and could have spent his days in Baghdad embroidering his memories of Marv. But if al-Khaṭīb's biography of him is any guide, the Baghdadi transmitters watched him like a hawk, and they say nothing to suggest that he purveyed legends of al-Riḍā's death. More telling is the brevity of his testimony in the *Maqātil*. If he had related elaborate death-tales during his lifetime, al-Iṣfahānī would doubtless have used them in his book, which after all is specifically about caliphs who murder Alids. Therefore, the best explanation for the discrepancy between the two recensions of Abū al-Ṣalt's testimony is that the *ʿUyūn* tales were constructed and transmitted only in Imami (and later, Twelver) circles after his death. Al-Iṣfahānī may have known the tales to be fabricated, or he may not have known about them at all.

Of the men credited with transmitting Abū al-Ṣalt's stories to Ibn Bābawayh, at least one may be spurious, and several others are possible fabricators. Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Anṣārī, the most commonly cited immediate trans-

¹¹⁷ Neither al-Najāshī nor al-Tūsī mentions Harthama as a companion of al-Riḍā (indeed, neither mentions him at all). Later Twelvers provided him with a Shi'ite whitewashing that obscures him beyond recognition (e.g., al-Irbilī, *Kashf*, III: 87).

¹¹⁸ As Scarcia Amoretti has shown, the version that appears in the *ʿUyūn* draws on elements of an Islamicized Iranian legend according to which a prophet challenges a water spirit and is buried alive. The fish appear in the legend as symbols of divine kingship. On the basis of such parallels, she describes Abū al-Ṣalt as a "typical interpreter of the ferments and the religious mentality of the eighth Imam's Khurasani contemporaries" ("Interpretazione," 51, based on *UAR*, I: 205–09). If correct, this judgement would apply less to Abū al-Ṣalt than to the transmitters who used his report as the inspiration for their stories.

¹¹⁹ The same is true of another piece of evidence from the *Maqātil*, the poem by Di'bīl in which he wonders whether al-Riḍā was poisoned. The *ʿUyūn* devotes a chapter to elegies on the Imam, including verses by Di'bīl, but this particular poem does not appear.

mitter from Abū al-Ṣalt, died sometime after 304/916–17, making the interval between the two almost impossibly long.¹²⁰ Between al-Anṣārī and Ibn Bābawayh in the *isnād* of Abū al-Ṣalt's debate-report are 'Abd Allāh b. Tamīm al-Qurashī and his son Tamīm, who also transmitted Harthama's spurious death-tale. In the *isnād* of Abū al-Ṣalt's death-report, the lowest common informant is 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm b. Hāshim. Following Schacht's common-link theory, both Tamīm b. 'Abd Allāh and 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm are likely suspects in the elaboration of Abū al-Ṣalt's testimony.¹²¹ Given the almost total lack of information on the men named, it is impossible to speculate any further. More important than naming the culprits, however, is recognizing their collective achievement. Singly or in collaboration, they took Abū al-Ṣalt's suggestive but ambiguous testimony and constructed from it a series of fictions. These fictions enabled al-Riḍā to fulfill his promise that he would die foully murdered by al-Ma'mūn.

Collision and collusion among the *ṭā'ifa*s

In his discussion of the Twelver accounts of al-Riḍā's heir apparency, van Ess declares that al-Ma'mūn serves in them merely as a prop.¹²² By this he evidently means that the caliph does just what the Twelvers need him to do: first he designates al-Riḍā, and then he poisons him. However, it should be clear that Ibn Bābawayh expends considerable effort trying to explain both these actions. As a result, al-Ma'mūn attains a certain degree of complexity in his own right. He is a partisan of the Alids and an admirer of al-Riḍā, but he is fated to poison him.¹²³ As a result, his predicament is tragic, or at least pathetic. When he learns, in pseudo-Harthama's story, that al-Riḍā foretold his own death, he realizes that his heir apparent really was the Imam. His complexion changes, and he faints. In his delirium, he calls out the names of the Imams from 'Alī b. Abī Tālib through 'Alī al-Riḍā, all of whom will stand against him on the Day of Judgement.¹²⁴ As a historical attribution, this speech is implausible (to say the least), but it is perfectly consistent with the caliph's character as the Twelver sources imagined it. He is an Alid sympathizer who murdered al-Riḍā in a fit of jealousy, and now he feels remorse.¹²⁵

Structurally, the *ṭā'ifa* of caliphs in Twelver biography serves as the demonic double of the *ṭā'ifa* of Imams. The caliphal claim to heirship represents a perversion of the true Alid one, just as oppressive caliphal rule represents a perversion of the imamate. As counterpoints to the Imams, the caliphs serve an

¹²⁰ Ṭūsī, *Rijāl*, 443. The reason seems to be that an intermediate transmitter, one Abū Bakr b. Ṣāliḥ, is omitted (see *ibid.*, 397). ¹²¹ Schacht, *Origins*, 171ff. ¹²² *ThG*, III: 156.

¹²³ E.g., *UAR*, I: 154–78. ¹²⁴ *UAR*, II: 249.

¹²⁵ Unlike the tragic heroes of Western drama, the caliph cannot plead compulsion by fate. According to al-Riḍā, God does not decree acts of disobedience because "He is too just to compel his creatures to sin and then punish them." See *UAR*, I: 142–45; Ābī, *Nathr al-durr*, quoted in al-Irbilī, *Kashf*, III: 142; and further Fyze, *Creed*, 36–37; Sourdel, "Imamisme," 239–41; and Madelung, "Imamism," 19–20.

important purpose in Twelver biography. Most notably, their persecution of the Imams confirms the rightness of Imami claims. If the Imams were not a threat, the caliphs would not have to murder them. To emphasize this point, Ibn Bābawayh cites several reports to the effect that a particular caliph acknowledged the Imam of his age. As part of this strategy, the same reports represent the Imam as reluctant to proclaim his identity to the caliph. The implication is that the Imam did not challenge the caliph directly, and provided no pretext for the latter to do away with him. Rather, the caliph simply perceives his rival's superior virtue and murders him (as al-Rashīd explained regarding al-Kāzīm) “because kingship has no mercy.”¹²⁶ When the caliph murders his rival, he must do so precisely because he knows him to be the Imam. If the biographer can show this, then the murder itself becomes proof of his subject's imamate.

The Twelver reports that feature al-Ma'mūn use elements derived from his biographies, including court figures like the singer Mukhāriq,¹²⁷ events like the debate-sessions associated with the caliphal court, and possibly even symbols like the fish that plays a role in al-Ma'mūn's death-tale *apud* al-Mas'ūdī. Most notably, the *‘Uyūn* also mentions an ascetic zealot who rebukes the caliph. The report (ascribed, once again, to Abū al-Ṣalt) states that a “Sufi” was accused of theft and brought to court. There, he defended himself by attacking al-Ma'mūn. Specifically, he accused him of failing to provide for the destitute as stipulated in the Qur'ān (8: 41 and 59: 7). The caliph turned to al-Riḍā, who customarily sat with him during public sessions, to ask his opinion. The Imam replied laconically that the Sufi had stolen only because he had been robbed. Al-Ma'mūn then flew into a rage and threatened to amputate the Sufi's hand. The Sufi audaciously replied that he could not because he (the caliph) was the son of a slave woman purchased with funds from the public treasury. “That,” he said, “makes you a slave to everyone, East and West, until they free you; and I haven't freed you yet.” Finally, he accused the caliph of “denying the rights of the Prophet's family.” The report continues:

“What should be done with him?” said al-Ma'mūn, turning to al-Riḍā. Al-Riḍā said: “God Almighty said to Muhammad: ‘Cogent proof (*al-ḥujja al-bāliḡha*) belongs to God. It does not reach the ignorant man, lest he despite his ignorance understand it as a knowledgeable man would. This world and the next are sustained by proof.’ And this man has adduced it.” Al-Ma'mūn thereupon ordered the Sufi released. Then he withdrew from the public eye and preoccupied himself with al-Riḍā. Eventually he murdered him by poison.¹²⁸

This report brings together representatives of three traditions, each with an account of its rights and responsibilities. At the beginning of the narrative, the caliph and the Imam have managed, however awkwardly, to reconcile their claims. When the Sufi appears, he takes the side of the Imam against the caliph, and so shatters the entente. In his own biographies, al-Ma'mūn always

¹²⁶ *UAR*, I: 88–93.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *UAR*, II: 237–38.

outwits the zealots with historical and jurisprudential arguments. Here, however, he flies into a rage and threatens to mutilate his challenger. He also resolves to poison the Imam, a tactic that amounts to an admission that the latter's arguments – albeit voiced by the Sufi – have won the day.

Apart from its historicity (even Ibn Bābawayh calls it doubtful) this report resonates with recurrent attributions of solidarity between Shiite and Sufi exemplars. In a recent study, Hamid Algar has drawn attention to reports of meetings between the early Imams, particularly Mūsā al-Kāẓim, and contemporary Sufis. Early Sufi authors such as al-Kalābādhī (d. 385/995) and al-Hujwīrī (d. c. 465/1071) list the first six Imams as exemplars for their subjects. Later compilers – preponderantly Sunnis – tell stories of meetings between the Imam al-Kāẓim and the ascetics Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 194/810) and Bishr al-Hāfi (d. 227/841).¹²⁹ One of these tales concerns 'Alī al-Riḍā in particular. In his entry on the Baghdad ascetic Ma'rūf al-Karkhī (d. 200/815), the Sufi biographer al-Sulamī (d. 414/1021) states that the ascetic converted to Islam at the hands of al-Riḍā and then worked as his doorkeeper. "One day," he adds, "the Shiites congregated at [al-Riḍā's] door in such numbers that they broke Ma'rūf's ribs, and he died."¹³⁰ Unfortunately, this event is supposed to have occurred in Baghdad, a city the Imam never visited. Al-Dhahabī thus calls al-Sulamī's account "incorrect," adding that "perhaps al-Riḍā had a doorkeeper named Ma'rūf, the same as that of the Iraqi renunciant."¹³¹ Algar, similarly, concludes that the historicity of such stories is "unproven" and only one is even "fully plausible." He nevertheless finds in their mere existence "historical and even spiritual significance" because they illustrate the Imams' status as "exemplars of the spiritual virtues" within the Sufi tradition.¹³²

The perdurability of this status is evident in Sufi masters' frequent claims to descent from the Imams. In the case of 'Alī al-Riḍā, we find the founders of the Bektashī, Kubrāwīya, and Nī'matullāhī Sufi orders and their various sub-branches tracing their chain of authority from 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, whom they believe to have received mystical gnosis from the Prophet. The chain of transmission then continues through the Twelver Imams as far as al-Riḍā, from him to Ma'rūf al-Karkhī, and from al-Karkhī through various intermediaries down to the founders of the respective orders.¹³³ These mythical genealogies, like the Sufi-episode in the *ʿUyūn*, illustrate an important function of the *ṭāʾifa*-model: the vindication of one's *ṭāʾifa* using the testimony of a representative of another. This strategy will recur in the biographies of Ibn Ḥanbal and the ascetic renunciant Bishr al-Hāfi (chs. 4 and 5), who (according to their biographers at least) were united in their disapproval of the Abbasid caliphs.

¹²⁹ Algar, "Imām Mūsā"; see also Massignon, *Essai*, 109–10.

¹³⁰ Sulamī, *Tabaqat*, 85. ¹³¹ *SAN*, XI: 343. I have found no references to Ma'rūf in the *ʿUyūn*.

¹³² Algar, "Imām Mūsā," 9. ¹³³ *Ibid.*, 10–11; Momen, *Introduction*, 209–11.

The tradition of criticism

Benefiting as it did from a long tradition of narrative misattribution, supplementation, and omission, the *‘Uyūn* managed to reconcile the conflicting demands of historical plausibility, doctrinal necessity, and spiritual inspiration. As a result, it proved extraordinarily successful. Nearly every biography of al-Riḍā from the fifth/eleventh century down to the present time draws on it, and its account of the Imam’s demise remains the firm if unexamined conviction of Twelver Shiites today.¹³⁴ Despite its popularity, however, Ibn Bābawayh’s account, particularly his treatment of al-Ma’mūn, did not escape criticism from later Shiite scholars. Surprisingly, perhaps, the dissenters did not base their objections on the dubious transmission and attribution of the relevant accounts. Instead, they directed their criticism to “the referential content of the report itself,” to use al-Ma’mūn’s supposed phrase.

In the *‘Uyūn*, Ibn Bābawayh adduces al-Riḍā’s attributes as evidence for his imamate. Of these attributes, his knowledge, certainly, is ontologically necessary. His death by foul play, on the other hand, is less clearly so. Is murder a necessary condition or concomitant of the imamate? Or is it a contingent attribute of the Imams, like their physical appearance or the number of their children? This question was addressed systematically and critically by Ibn Bābawayh’s younger contemporary al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1032). Al-Mufīd disagreed with many of Ibn Bābawayh’s positions – implied or explicit – on the nature of argumentation generally, and on the nature of the imams specifically.¹³⁵ He considered certain properties, such as infallibility, to be necessary attributes of the Imam; and certain other properties as possibly existing but not necessary. Regarding the Imams’ knowledge of all crafts and languages, for example, he writes that nothing prevents them from having such knowledge. However, it is not rationally necessary that they have it (*lā wājibun min jihati ‘l-‘aql wa ‘l-qiyās*).¹³⁶ The same applies to supernatural knowledge: “I hold that the Imams could read the minds of certain people and knew what was to happen before it happened. However, this is not a necessary attribute nor a condition of their imamate.”¹³⁷ What about death by foul play? Al-Mufīd is aware that Ibn Bābawayh made the murder-argument to refute the *ghulāh*, who held the Imams to be divine and thus immortal. Though he too has no patience for the *ghulāh*, whom he calls “misguided infidels,” al-Mufīd is unwilling to twist either logic or history for the sake of refuting them.

As for [Ibn Bābawayh’s] statement that the Prophet and the Imams all died by poison or by violence: some of them did, and the others did not. It is certain that ‘Alī, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn left this world murdered, not by natural causes. Of their successors, [al-Kāẓim] was poisoned, and al-Riḍā probably was as well, although there is

¹³⁴ The present-day citizens of Mashhad have reportedly added a new character to the story: a slave-woman who tricked the Imam into taking the poison (Hossein Ziai, personal communication). ¹³⁵ See further Sourdel, “Imamisme”; Madelung, “Imamism,” 21–25.

¹³⁶ Mufīd, *Awā’il*, 76. ¹³⁷ Ibid., 77.

some doubt about it (*wa-yaqwā fi 'l-nafs amru 'l-Riḍā wa-in kāna fihi shakk*). As for the others, there is no way of knowing whether they were poisoned, assassinated, or killed in captivity. Accounts claiming [murder] fall under the heading of divisive rumors, and are not susceptible to confirmation.¹³⁸

In his biographical practice, al-Mufīd conforms to his stated positions on the imamic attributes as well as his reservations about making unsubstantiated accusations. According to his *Kitāb al-irshād*, the fourth, fifth, sixth, eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh Imams died natural deaths; 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and al-Ḥusayn were assassinated; and al-Ḥasan and Mūsā al-Kāẓim were poisoned. In the entry on Muḥammad al-Taḳī, al-Mufīd affirms the criterion for accepting murder-tales. "It is said that he died from poisoning, but I am aware of no confirmed report saying so, such as would make me attest to it."¹³⁹ As for al-Riḍā, al-Mufīd presents the same reports al-Isfahānī used in the *Maqātil*, that is, reports that do not insist on the caliph's guilt.¹⁴⁰ Al-Mufīd seems to think it likely that al-Riḍā was poisoned, not because Ibn Bābawayh's murder doctrine says so, but because reasonably trustworthy reports imply that this was the case.

Ironically, al-Mufīd's decision to include al-Isfahānī's poisoning stories in his widely cited *Irshād* exposed him to criticism by later scholars who shared his doubts about the poisoning of al-Riḍā. The first of these skeptics appears to be Raḳī al-Dīn b. Ṭāwūs (d. 664/1266), who "used to read extensively and subject such matters to careful investigation and scrutiny," and "did not agree or believe that al-Ma'mūn poisoned [al-Riḍā]."¹⁴¹ Among the readings that contributed to this conviction was al-Ma'mūn's letter to the Abbasids, which he found in the *Nadīm al-farīd* of (Ibn) Miskawayh (421/1030). As we have seen, the letter argues for the precedence of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib over al-'Abbās, praises al-Riḍā in the highest terms, and describes his death as an unfortunate and unexpected event.¹⁴² If Ibn Ṭāwūs thought this letter authentic, it is clear why he considered the caliph innocent of al-Riḍā's murder. Besides affirming al-Ma'mūn's Alid sympathies, the letter suggests that he held his Abbasid relatives in such low esteem that he is unlikely to have murdered the Imam just to please them.

Next in the line of skeptics is 'Alī b. 'Īsa al-Irbilī (d. 717/1317). In his view, al-Ma'mūn's "kindness to and affection for [al-Riḍā], and his appointment of him at the expense of his own relatives and children, all support and confirm" the skepticism of Ibn Ṭāwūs. Moreover, he says, al-Mufīd "mentions certain

¹³⁸ Mufīd, *Taṣṭih*, 217. ¹³⁹ Mufīd, *Irshād*, 326.

¹⁴⁰ He attributes them not to al-Isfahānī, but to the latter's source, Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Ḥamza. Al-Mufīd may have used the older source directly, but it appears more likely that he simply reproduced al-Isfahānī's recension (omitting the miracle of the gravesite, which in any event does not appear in all the manuscripts of al-Isfahānī's work). Al-Mufīd includes no material not already found in the *Maqātil*, and we know he had it available because he cites it in another part of the *Irshād* (276). Cf. al-Majlisī, who imagines that al-Isfahānī copied from al-Mufīd (*Biḥār*, XLIX: 309). ¹⁴¹ Irbilī, *Kashf*, III: 112.

¹⁴² Madelung, "New Documents," 340–44; above, pp. 30–31.

things that my critical sense cannot accept.” These include the claim that the Imam antagonized the sons of Sahl, who retaliated by turning the caliph’s opinion against him. This explanation, says al-Irbilī, “is not particularly convincing.” The Imam “was too preoccupied with matters of religion and salvation” to involve himself in court intrigue. Moreover, had al-Ma’mūn found al-Riḍā troublesome, all he had to do was ask him to stop his exhortations, not murder him. “Furthermore, we do not know that needles plunged into grapes make the grapes poisonous; medical reasoning indicates that they would not.” Finally, al-Irbilī too refers to the caliphal letter, in which he remembers reading that al-Ma’mūn insulted the Abbasids and praised al-Riḍā.¹⁴³ “These and similar points,” he concludes, “acquit al-Ma’mūn of suspicion that he would pursue the undoing of such a noble soul, especially when doing so would mean perdition in this world and the next.”¹⁴⁴

Al-Irbilī’s frequent disclaimers, as well as his need to invoke Ibn Tāwūs’ authority, suggest that the other view of al-Riḍā’s death was the more prominent. Indeed, I have found no Twelver source before Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1111/1699–1700) that cites the dissenters, and even al-Majlisī cites them only to condemn them. He ascribes the belief in murder to “our side,” and the other view to “dissenters.” He calls al-Irbilī’s arguments “silly,” and offers a rebuttal of them. Al-Riḍā probably did attack the sons of Sahl, out of obedience to the command to enjoin good and forbid evil. For his part, the caliph had planned from the outset to use the nomination to pacify rebellious Alids in the provinces. When al-Riḍā had served this purpose, he did away with him. “Thus, the truth is what [Ibn Bābawayh], al-Mufīd, and other eminent authorities have stated.” That is, al-Riḍā “died as a martyr poisoned by the accursed al-Ma’mūn – curses on him, and on all usurpers and oppressors forever!”¹⁴⁵

The fourteenth/twentieth-century Shī‘ite authority Muḥsin al-Amīn (d. 1371/1951–52), the last representative of the classical tradition, also opts for poisoning. However, he is less caustic and more thorough than al-Majlisī in responding to al-Irbilī’s objections. He bases his reconstruction on a combination of external historical evidence, psychological plausibility, and reliance upon the authority of his predecessors, specifically al-Iṣfahānī, implying that he finds Ibn Bābawayh’s reports dubious and unreliable. The appointment “may have been a trick from the beginning, as al-Majlisī would have it, or it may have been sincere.” However, the caliph is doubtless guilty of murder, because “even good intentions are subject to change when a ruler fears for his power.” The caliph’s motive for killing both al-Faḍl b. Sahl and al-Riḍā was his desire to regain control of Iraq. Al-Iṣfahānī’s account supports the conclusion that al-Riḍā fell ill because of some food he happened to eat; al-Ma’mūn then seized the opportunity to poison him. About the grapes he says: “It is

¹⁴³ The passage al-Irbilī cites from it does not appear in the version translated by Madelung (“New Documents,” 340–44). Al-Irbilī is nevertheless correct in his recollection of the tone of the letter. ¹⁴⁴ Irbilī, *Kashf*, III: 112–13. ¹⁴⁵ Majlisī, *Biḥār*, XII: 311.

clear from the report that the needles were infused with a subtle poison. We are not meant to think that their mere insertion into the grapes produced the toxin."¹⁴⁶

The afterlife of the murder-stories illustrates that Twelver biographers, whether they believed al-Ma'mūn guilty or not, write as if Ibn Bābawayh's reports have little bearing on the issue. Perhaps they knew that his reports were indefensible as historical evidence, and preferred not to compromise their arguments by citing them. When they adduce murder-accounts, the later authorities use the ones from al-Iṣfāhānī's *Maqātil*, which appear to have acquired Twelver credentials simply because they had been cited by al-Mufīd. Moreover, all of the critics except for al-Mufīd adjudicate the issue on the basis of the personality of the actors and their knowledge of the historical context. For al-Mufīd, the manner of al-Riḍā's death had nothing to do with his imamate. The other biographers do not assert that it did, but nevertheless feel obliged to take a position on the issue. For Ibn Ṭawūs and al-Irbilī, the caliph's behavior is best explained by assuming his good faith. For al-Majlisī and al-Amīn, it is best explained by assuming his perfidy. More recent work by Shiite scholars shows that the dispute is far from over. In 1985, Ja'far Murtaḍā al-'Amīlī published a polemical screed that insists on al-Ma'mūn's malevolence. In 1995, Ḥasan al-Amīn made a more judicious but equally heartfelt argument for the caliph's good will.¹⁴⁷ Despite their differences, both scholars follow their critical predecessors in arguing largely from external evidence and downplaying the reports in Ibn Bābawayh's *Uyūn*.

Conclusions

Like al-Riḍā's shrine at Mashhad, his biographical tradition is the result of a long process of reconstruction, expansion, and elaboration by his faithful. At the time of his death and burial in an obscure corner of Khurasan, al-Riḍā was one of several claimants to the imamate. Worse yet, he died compromised by his appointment to the heir apparenity. With the crystallization of Twelver doctrine in the early fourth/tenth century, he nevertheless assumed his place as the eighth of the twelve Imams. The definitive Twelver account of his life by Ibn Bābawayh displays the traces of the struggles undergone to substantiate this claim. The biographer represents al-Riḍā as the self-evidently superior and eternally predestined leader of the Muslim community. In al-Riḍā's day, however, neither of these claims was easy to substantiate. The primary means of doing so was the question-and-answer session, of which the extant reports appear to convey the tone, if not always the precise content. The *Uyūn*, of course, presents al-Riḍā as upholding in his answers the unchanged

¹⁴⁶ Amīn, *A'yūn*, IV (part 2), 154–58. A similar historical argument appears in a number of Western works, e.g., Sourdél, "Politique," 34; *Vizirat*, I: 209. However, the revolt of Abū al-Sarāyā in Kufa had already been suppressed at the time of the nomination (see further Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, 414). ¹⁴⁷ 'Amīlī, *Ḥayāh siyāsīya*; Amīn, *Riḍā*.

and unchanging teachings of his forbears. However, because the reports must preserve a semblance of the original questions to make their point, they permit a partial reconstruction of the conditions under which al-Riḍā carried out his struggle for recognition.

The minimal conditions of the imamate in al-Riḍā’s day included Alid descent and privileged interpretive insight. The mere fact of al-Riḍā’s descent from al-Ḥusayn met the first condition without any effort on his part. The second condition was *‘ilm*, knowledge, which consisted at least in part of *fiqh*, interpretive ability. How could an Imam prove that his *‘ilm* was greater than that of other Ḥadīth-scholars and jurists? The pioneering theorists of Imamism responded to this challenge with impressive resourcefulness. The one thing an Imam knew better than anyone else was his family history, which embodied a *sunna* that went back to the Prophet. As the *‘Uyūn* reveals, this *sunna* included everything from the mirrors hanging in al-Kāẓim’s house to al-Ṣādiq’s favorite Ḥadīth. Among those who had accepted his family’s imamate, al-Riḍā could relate the details of his ancestors’ domestic lives with every assurance that they would be accepted as evidence of privileged insight (as, according to the definition, they were).

In redefining the *sunna* in such a way as to restrict the number of its potential interpreters, the Imamis were behaving in a manner different only in detail from that of the Sunni Ḥadīth-scholars, who confined exemplarity to the Prophet and the Companions, and *‘ilm* (in the post-lapsarian present) to themselves.¹⁴⁸ Once the principle of privileged insight was established, however, it lent itself to polemical exaggeration by partisans of different Alid candidates. In the course of the formative debates on the nature and identity of the Imams, *‘ilm* came to encompass knowledge of everything, including the past, the future, and the secret thoughts of men. Evidently, al-Riḍā found such misconceptions irritating. For one thing, they compromised the integrity of the original definition of *‘ilm*. For another, they made the Shia an object of outraged condemnation and baffled ridicule. Most important, perhaps, the Imam could not possibly live up to the expectations they generated.

Among these expectations was that he would do a better job of ruling than the Abbasid caliph. Oddly enough, al-Ma’mūn himself appears to have shared in these expectations. However, his designation of al-Riḍā as heir apparent upset the longstanding arrangement by which the Imam held himself aloof from an office he was not permitted to occupy. Had al-Riḍā succeeded as caliph, he would have had to define the office without reference to a concurrent perversion of it. In the event, death saved him and his community from the crisis his accession would doubtless have provoked. Moreover, his untimely decease fitted in all too well with the notion that “all the Imams die murdered,” and doubtless helped to sustain it. As satisfying as it was for

¹⁴⁸ I am grateful to Nagel for pointing out the parallel roles of the Sunni Companions and the Shiite Imams (*Rechtleitung*, 290–91).

doctrinal purposes, however, the murder-doctrine only emphasized the parallelism between the caliphs and the Imams. By murdering their rivals one by one, the caliphs were the ones who defined the length of their imamates and the timing of the succession. For this reason, perhaps, some Shiite scholars took issue with Ibn Bābawayh's insistence on the murder-doctrine in general, or with his account of al-Riḍā's death in particular.

As the case of Abū al-Ṣalt al-Harawī suggests, a contemporary observer could profess loyalty to al-Ma'mūn as well as to al-Riḍā. A companion of both men, he appears to have thought the caliph innocent of murdering the Imam. Unfortunately for the Twelvers, he was one of the few sympathetic eye-witnesses to the Imam's last days. From his reports, transmitters eventually constructed a complete explanation of the designation, the Imam's acceptance of it, and the circumstances of his untimely death. This explanation follows Abū al-Ṣalt in attributing genuine Shiite sympathies to al-Ma'mūn. However, it insists that the caliph, despite his acknowledgement of al-Riḍā's superiority, poisoned him in a fit of jealousy. To be useful to Ibn Bābawayh, Abū al-Ṣalt's original testimony had to be changed almost beyond recognition. These changes include many elaborations and one critical omission: the Imam's declaration of the caliph's innocence. Yet the portrait of al-Ma'mūn that emerges from these heavy-handed manipulations accords surprisingly well with the image of him that appears in his own biographies and in other documentary evidence. His Shiite sympathies, his intellectual venturesomeness, and even his Sufi critics play a prominent role in the Twelver reports, as they do in his own biographies.

However doubtful parts of it may be as history, the Riḍā-legend demonstrates the power of biography in creating and sustaining communities of faith. The *Firaq* states that some who doubted al-Riḍā's imamate returned to the Imami fold because they heard *akhbār* that convinced them of the truth of his claim. In their own way, the skeptics of the *wāqifa* made a contribution as well. By insisting that al-Riḍā meet their very high and very specific expectations, they helped define a notion of heirship to the Prophet that could thrive even after the caliphs no longer existed as meaningful objects of comparison. In this, too, the Twelvers resemble the Sunnis. Both groups used the notion of heirship to the prophet to express dissatisfaction with the caliphate and to advocate another, better imam. It is al-Ma'mūn's ill fortune to have contributed to the reputation of two such figures, the other being Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, the subject of the next chapter.

The Ḥadīth-scholar Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal

By God, I have given all I could in this effort; and I hope to come out of it even, without winning or losing.

Ibn Ḥanbal after his trial, as cited by his son Ṣāliḥ¹

Introduction

The Qur'ān exhorts the believers to obey the Prophet (59: 7) and emulate his good example (33: 21). When he died, according to Ibn Hishām's *Sīra*, some of the mourners wanted to bury him in the mosque. Others, however, recommended interring him with his companions. Then Abū Bakr spoke up: "I heard the Messenger of God say that no prophet has ever been buried anywhere except in the place where he died." His deathbed was accordingly lifted off the floor and his grave was dug on the spot.² Ibn Hishām's account thus credits Abū Bakr with being the first to invoke Muḥammad's words as a source of guidance after his death. In later times, the Prophet's words and deeds, transmitted by such men as Abū Bakr, took on an importance second only to that of the Qur'ān. In the first and second centuries, however, the Prophet's practice was only one component of the *sunna* – the normative practice of the first Muslims. By force of circumstances, the judgements of the Companions appear to have been an equally rich source of precedent. As Islam spread beyond Medina, the men and women who could recall the practice of the early community were the only source of information even for such elementary rituals as prayer and almsgiving. At the same time, many *sunan* were fabricated to support one or another dynasty, faction, or school of thought; and even genuine reports were spuriously "lifted," that is, ascribed to the Prophet rather than the Companions.³ In response to the proliferation of reports, critical transmitters claimed for themselves an authority superior to that of their rivals the *akhbārīs* and the *quṣṣās* ("storytellers"), whom they decried as purveyors of pious legends, historical fables, and scurrilous gossip.⁴ The need for

¹ Ṣāliḥ, *Sīra*, 66.

² Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, IV: 314–15.

³ Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, I: 18–125.

⁴ On the *akhbārīs*, see p. 2ff. above; on the *quṣṣās*, see Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 9–76.

a good account of *sunna* became even more pressing after the Medinese jurist Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820) made the definitive argument for its indispensability to the formulation of law. The bases of jurisprudence, he said, consisted of the Qurʾān, the *sunna*, consensus, and analogy. The *sunna*, in turn, consisted of the attested practice of the Prophet or of the Companions, with the former taking precedence.⁵

Many Ḥadīth-scholars found al-Shāfiʿī's jurisprudence more acceptable than that of the older schools of law, which now seemed overly dependent on *ra'y*, "judgement" or "opinion," not Prophetic practice.⁶ For some scholars, however, even al-Shāfiʿī was an innovator. The leading representative of the rigorist school, Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (164–241/780–855), declared that analogy and consensus, even as last resorts, had no place in the law. Rather, the Qurʾān and the *sunna* – transmitted in the form of Ḥadīth by specialists like himself – were the only acceptable guides to belief and action:

Religion consists solely of the Book of God and genuine reports of practice transmitted on the authority of trustworthy persons. [Such reports must] relate information that is authentic, believable, and generally known. They must confirm one another. They must go back as far as the Prophet (may God bless and save him), his Companions (may God be pleased with them), the next generation, the generation after that, or to members of subsequent generations who are acknowledged leaders (*a'imma*) worthy of emulation. [These leaders] cleave to ordinary practice (*sunna*) and cling to the remnant thereof. They perpetrate no innovations, inspire no mistrust, and provoke no dissension. They are not proponents of analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) or of personal judgement (*ra'y*). Analogy is invalid in matters of religion, and personal judgement is even worse. Advocates of *ra'y* and *qiyās* in religion are misguided innovators, except when there is a precedent (*athar*) for [their verdict] in [the verdicts of] past authorities.⁷

Despite its emphasis on "past authorities," this notion of *sunna* permitted – indeed, required – that later generations strive to live just as the first Muslims had.⁸ Their guide in this striving was to be the *sunna*, which for Ibn Ḥanbal meant the totality of reliable reports about the Prophet and the Companions.⁹ Ibn Ḥanbal admitted that the number of believers endowed with adequate knowledge (*ilm*) had been decreasing steadily. However, knowledge had not disappeared altogether. Rather, God had preserved a remnant of "knowers" in every age. This remnant consisted of Ḥadīth-scholars, whose duty it was "to guide the errant, warn against perdition, revive the dead with the Book of God, and use the Prophet's *sunna* to save the ignorant and damned."¹⁰ Prominent scholars were thus imams or "exemplars," encharged with saving the community from innovation and dissent. The *sunna*, at first a guide to

⁵ Schacht, *Origins*, esp. 58ff., 134.

⁶ On the debate between *aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth* and *aṣḥāb al-ra'y*, see further Melchert, *Formation*, 1–31; Dickinson, "Aḥmad b. al-Ṣalt." ⁷ *TḤ*, I: 31; cf. I: 15.

⁸ Cf. Hodgson, *Venture*, I: 318–32.

⁹ Ibn Ḥanbal did not distinguish systematically between the two types; see further Melchert, *Formation*, 15–16. ¹⁰ *ManḤ*, 167.

practice in uncertain circumstances, had now become a means of salvation in its own right.

For many of his contemporaries, it was Ibn Ḥanbal who came closest to fulfilling the mission God had entrusted to the *ahl al-ḥadīth*. He is described as a dark-skinned man of middle height who wore a coarse white turban and loin-cloth, and dyed his beard with henna. He would avoid conversation on worldly matters, “but if *‘ilm* were mentioned, he would speak.”¹¹ He was born in Khurasan to a prominent *abnā’* family of Basran origin; his grandfather had been governor of Sarakhs.¹² After his father’s premature death, his mother moved to Iraq. He thus grew up in Baghdad, where he attended a Qur’ān-school. At sixteen, he left home to seek Ḥadīth, and traveled to Kufa, Basra, the Hijaz, and the Yemen to attend the lectures of noted transmitters. He reportedly refused help, even from his mother, and was forced to travel on foot even to destinations as distant as Mecca and Tarsus. During his journeys, he would sleep with his head resting on a brick. Despite these privations, he eventually memorized (it is said) the texts and *isnāds* of one million Ḥadīth-reports.

Back in Baghdad, Ibn Ḥanbal taught Ḥadīth until compelled to stop by the Inquisition. He did not, however, accept payment for teaching, nor did he accept charitable gifts from admirers. His family supported itself on the rents of a tenement which he owned, and on the sale of cloths spun by his wife. Among his closest associates were his son Ṣāliḥ (d. 265/878)¹³ and his cousin Ḥanbal (d. 273/886–87),¹⁴ both of whom later wrote biographies of him, as well as Abū Bakr al-Khallāl (d. 311/923), who collected his opinions and composed the first biographical dictionary for the nascent Ḥanbalī school.¹⁵ The works ascribed to Ibn Ḥanbal himself were compiled by his disciples, sometimes directly from dictation, and in some cases apparently with substantial contributions by the compilers.¹⁶ Chief among these works is the *Musnad*, which ranks among the six canonical collections of Sunni Ḥadīth. Other works of importance for our purposes are the *Kitāb al-zuhd*, a collection of reports on the great ascetics of history; the *Kitāb al-wara’*, on proper conduct in a variety of everyday situations; the *Kitāb al-‘ilal wa-ma’rifat al-rijāl*, on Ḥadīth and Ḥadīth-scholars; and the *Radd ‘alā al-zanādiqa wa ‘l-jahmīya*, a refutation of the createdness of the Qur’ān and a reply to the accusations of anthropomorphism.

When the caliph al-Ma’mūn ordered the examination of the jurists in 218/833, Ibn Ḥanbal, who was not a judge, was not immediately named.

¹¹ *ManIH*, 208.

¹² *TB*, V: 181 (no. 2632). The remainder of my summary is derived from the family biographies by Ṣāliḥ and Ḥanbal; *ManIH*; and *SAN*, XI: 177–358.

¹³ The imam’s eldest son; he reportedly handled his father’s correspondence and attended him on his deathbed. He was later appointed judge in Tarsus and then in Isfahān (*TH*, I: 173–76).

¹⁴ The son of the imam’s paternal uncle Ishāq; he taught Ḥadīth in ‘Ukbāra and al-Wāṣit, and by his own account compiled the *Musnad* (*TH*, I: 143–45).

¹⁵ Melchert, *Formation*, esp. 137–55.

¹⁶ See further Sezgin, *Geschichte*, I: 502–09; Melchert, *Formation*, 137–47.

Apparently taken aback by the resistance to the *khalq al-Qurʿān*, al-Maʾmūn then broadened the scope of the Inquisition to include Ḥadīth-scholars. Ibn Ḥanbal was duly interrogated, but withheld his consent to the createdness-doctrine. The caliph, then at Tarsus on the Byzantine frontier, ordered the Baghdadi dissenters sent to him for trial. However, they were spared when he suddenly died. Sent back to the capital in chains, Ibn Ḥanbal remained for a time in the commoners' prison before entering the custody of Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm, the prefect of Baghdad. Ibn Ḥanbal's uncle then interceded with Ishāq to allow his nephew to defend his views in a debate. To everyone's dismay, Ibn Ḥanbal still refused to capitulate. Dragged before al-Maʾmūn's successor, the caliph al-Muʿtaṣim, he disputed the createdness of the Qurʿān with the court scholars and resisted all attempts to reach a compromise. On the third day of his trial, still defiant, he was suspended between two posts and flogged. Then, surprisingly, he was released.¹⁷

Ibn Ḥanbal continued to teach for the remainder of al-Muʿtaṣim's reign, but went into hiding during the reign of the next caliph, al-Wāthiq, who pursued the Inquisition vigorously. The *miḥna* finally came to an end under al-Wāthiq's successor al-Mutawakkil. Soon after his accession in 232/847, he declared *al-sunna wa 'l-jamāʿa*, the anti-Shiite and anti-philosophical stance Ibn Ḥanbal had long represented, the official creed of the Abbasid caliphate. He also invited Ibn Ḥanbal to attend him at Samarra. The scholar, now old and ill, reluctantly complied. Soon afterwards, he was permitted to return to Baghdad. He refused thereafter to teach Ḥadīth, apparently for fear that al-Mutawakkil would ask him to tutor the heir apparent. He had also come to resent his relatives, who had accepted the caliph's gifts. Ibn Ḥanbal remained in seclusion until he died in 241/855, at the age of seventy-seven. He was reportedly besieged in his later years by courtiers begging forgiveness for the Inquisition, and his funeral was described as the largest Islam had ever known.

Now restored to favor, the Ḥanbalīs of Baghdad rallied around the Abbasid caliphate, although their penchant for vigilantism and anti-Shiite rabble-rousing often earned them condemnation by the authorities.¹⁸ This period also witnessed the development of a distinctively Ḥanbalī school of jurisprudence. As Christopher Melchert has now conclusively demonstrated, Ibn Ḥanbal himself did not found the institution that bears his name.¹⁹ Indeed, the notion of a "Ḥanbalī school" would doubtless have been repugnant to him. Due, however, to the efforts of Abū Bakr al-Khallāl, who "followed up [his] texts, wrote them down, and checked their proofs,"²⁰ a Ḥanbalī school of *fiqh* did emerge, and eventually became one of the most prominent social and intellectual forces in Sunni Islam. Much of its influence is due to Abū al-Ḥasan al-

¹⁷ Hanbal places this event in 219, but given the length of Ibn Ḥanbal's imprisonment, 220 is a likelier date (*ThG*, III: 462; cf. Jadʿān, *Miḥna*, 151).

¹⁸ See Laoust, "Hanbalisme" and *Profession*; Makdisi, *Ibn ʿAqil*; Sabari, *Mouvements*, 101–20.

¹⁹ Melchert, *Formation*, esp. 137–55.

²⁰ Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 14: 297, cited in Melchert, *Formation*, 143.

Ash'arī (d. c. 324/935), who shored up Ḥanbalī literalism with deftly argued *kalām* to lay the foundation for modern Sunni theology.²¹ Later, Ibn Ḥanbal's rigor and personal courage were most spectacularly emulated by the Damascene jurist Taqī al-Dīn b. Taymiya (d. 728/1328), famous for his polemics against Shiism, Aḥmadī Sufism, and tomb-cults. Ibn Taymiya in turn served as a formative example for the Najdī reformer Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792), whose missionary activity spurred the formation of the modern state of Saudi Arabia.²² Through his disciples and through the works compiled in his name, Ibn Ḥanbal thus remains important in modern Sunni Islam. His teachings are invoked not only by Wahhābī and other Ḥanbalī jurists, but also by contemporary Sufi thinkers, who appear anxious to secure his approval of their doctrines.²³

Designated an imam (that is, a leader and exemplar in the Sunni sense),²⁴ Ibn Ḥanbal became a favorite subject of biographers both inside and outside the school.²⁵ The Ḥanbalī biographers took particular interest in the Inquisition, which posed two problems for their *madhhab*. The first was the apparent contradiction between Ibn Ḥanbal's quietist pronouncements and his refusal to heed the caliphal declaration of the *khalq al-Qur'ān*. The second problem was the necessity of explaining why the inquisitors released him if he had never capitulated. Several Shāfi'ī biographers also composed biographies of the imam. Although they praised his bravery and his knowledge of Ḥadīth, some doubted his *fiqh*, that is, his ability to derive rulings from the Ḥadīth as opposed to simply memorizing it. Of course, such insinuations provoked an indignant response from the Ḥanbalīs. Finally, a few Sufi biographers, impressed by his Sunnism, his piety, and his lifelong poverty, wrote biographies of the imam as well. The Ḥanbalīs, some of whom were Sufis themselves, did not object, except when Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038) went so far as to declare him a Sufi.

In recognition of Ibn Ḥanbal's heirship to the Prophet, his biographers gave him a *sīra* nearly as long as the Prophet's, and just as replete with evocative detail. The imam's exemplification of the *sunna* in the fallen world of third-century Baghdad depended on his living in the same social and material world as his fellow men, and that is how his biographers portray him. Al-Ma'mūn and his biographers, as we have seen, called the Baghdadis "rabble," and described them as ragged, ignorant, and dangerous. Ibn Ḥanbal and his biographers, on the other hand, call them *nās*, "people," and praise the ragged ones as virtuous ascetics. In his study of the Gospels, Erich Auerbach argued that the depiction of the moral struggles of ordinary people opened up daily life

²¹ Goldziher, *Introduction*, 103ff., esp. 105; Makdisi, *Humanism*, 5–7.

²² Laoust, *Essai*, esp. 76–80 and 506–14.

²³ A search of the Internet turns up hundreds of references to Ibn Ḥanbal in Islamic Web pages and discussion groups. Some invoke his (alleged) approval of Sufism; others cite him in polemics for and against "Salafism" (by which the authors appear to mean the Muwahhīd or "Wahhābī" movement). ²⁴ See glossary.

²⁵ For early works see Laoust, "Hanbalisme," 81, 96, 98, 102, 107.

as a dignified subject of mimesis for the first time in Western literature.²⁶ In the Arabic Islamic tradition, the Prophet's *sīra* arguably set a comparable precedent. Muḥammad, like Jesus, began his mission among the poor and the outcast, and their responses to his challenge are depicted with unblinking attention to concrete and frequently awkward material circumstances. Similarly, Ibn Ḥanbal's biographers, many of whom appear to have been inspired by the *sīra*, treat the world of the *ʿumma* as an appropriate setting for the emergence of religious truth.

Ibn Ḥanbal and the proto-Sunni community

The family biographies depict Ibn Ḥanbal and his associates as a community set apart by its knowledge of and devotion to the *sunna*. The imam's familiarity with the world of the first Muslims appears to have been astonishingly thorough: a report preserved in a later source has him ask his wife Rayḥāna to stop wearing a certain kind of shoe because "it didn't exist in the Prophet's time."²⁷ According to Ṣāliḥ, his father would cite a precedent for judgements covering even the most trivial aspects of daily life. When he led a prayer for men who had missed the Friday devotions, he justified his action by referring to the practice of Companions who had done the same.²⁸ For the practice of walking ahead of funeral processions, he cited not only the Prophet but also Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān, and a grandson of ʿUmar as authorities. When Ṣāliḥ had a new ceiling put in, his father protested by dictating a report about a Companion who refused to enter his house after the ceiling had been decorated.²⁹ In the *Kitāb al-waraʿ*, similarly, the imam or one of his disciples adduces a precedent for practically every question brought to their attention.³⁰ One such exchange illustrates the workings of his *fiqh*, which at least theoretically excluded analogical reasoning. Asked whether girls should be allowed to play with dolls, he replied that dolls are images, and images are forbidden. To prove this, he cited a report to the effect that anything with a head is an image, and pointed out that dolls have not only heads but chests, eyes, noses, and teeth. But, he was asked, didn't ʿĀ'isha report playing with dolls? When he expressed a doubt about the report in question, his disciple Abū Bakr al-Marrūdhī (d. 275/888–89)³¹ adduced a series of Ḥadīth in which the Prophet disapproves of cloth and furnishings decorated with animal shapes.³²

In commanding his disciples to avoid the "dubious" (*al-shubha*),³³ Ibn Ḥanbal acted on the principle that one should avoid those permitted things which resemble forbidden things, so as to establish a "border" around the for-

²⁶ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 24–49.

²⁷ *TH*, I: 429. A parallel report states that he only objected because her shoes would squeak.

²⁸ Ṣāliḥ, *Sīra*, 34–38. ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 40–41; cf. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Waraʿ*, 185.

³⁰ See further Spector, "Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's *Fiqh*."

³¹ Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Muḥammad, compiler of the *Kitāb al-waraʿ* (*TH*, I: 56–63).

³² Ibn Ḥanbal, *Waraʿ*, 141–43.

³³ Defined as "that of which we can say neither that it is *ḥalāl* nor that it is *ḥarām*"; *ibid.*, 47.

bidden.³⁴ The consequent sense of separation within the community of believers is evident from the *Kitāb al-waraʿ*, which assumes that outsiders (*man tukrahu nāḥiyatuhu*) fail to uphold all the injunctions of the *sunna*. As a result, anything they build, inhabit, wear, produce, sell, or give away constitutes a likely source of contamination. For example, they buy and sell in the street, even though the *sunna* forbids impeding a public thoroughfare. Ibn Ḥanbal thus enjoined his followers not to drink water from wells built along the road or buy merchandise from street vendors.³⁵ Because involvement with the world (*al-dunyā*) inevitably exposes a believer to objects that may be contaminated, Ibn Ḥanbal exhorted his disciples to engage in trades they could oversee themselves. In the *Kitāb al-waraʿ*, he recommends plaiting palm-leaves or making spindles as a way to earn a living.³⁶ In the family biographies, he notes his wife's conformance to this injunction, reporting to Ṣāliḥ that "when prices were high, your mother would spin a fine cloth, and make curtains to sell for two dirhams more or less; and that's how we would eat."³⁷

As these examples suggest, Sunni scrupulosity tended to isolate the community from the economic mainstream. It could also weaken, if not sever, ties of kinship. Ibn Ḥanbal forbade his disciples to run errands on behalf of relatives who lent money at interest or represented merchandise dishonestly.³⁸ If one's parents serve food of unknown provenance, one should refrain from eating rather than simply leave. Should they persist in eating doubtful food, however, one should live elsewhere.³⁹ On one occasion, al-Marrūdhī asked Ibn Ḥanbal whether it is acceptable in such cases to induce vomiting. The imam could recall only one Companion who had done so. Al-Marrūdhī then brought up the example of the Baghdad ascetic Bishr b. al-Ḥārith (d. 227/842; see ch. 5). His brother had sent some dates from Ubulla, and his mother pleaded with him to eat just one. Bishr obeyed, but then went up on the roof and spat it out.⁴⁰ Ibn Ḥanbal praised the ascetic's scrupulosity, but noted that such rigor was only possible if one did not have a family to support (Ibn Ḥanbal was married; Bishr was not).⁴¹

Ibn Ḥanbal's penchant for scrupulosity is nowhere more evident than in his dealings with the state, a particularly virulent source of ritual pollution.⁴² Asked about the reliability of one Ḥafṣ al-Farkh, Ibn Ḥanbal said, "I haven't written anything of his; he was a follower of the government."⁴³ Kept in confinement at the palace of al-Mu'taṣim, Ibn Ḥanbal "made excuses" to avoid eating the food served to him by the caliph's staff. According to Ṣāliḥ, he said: "I only ate as much as I needed to keep body and soul together, and

³⁴ He attributes the expression *al-ḥājiz min al-ḥalāl* to Maymūn b. Mahrān (Ibn Ḥanbal, *Waraʿ*, 44) and Sufyān b. ʿUyayna (ibid., 50), and finds a similar sentiment in the Ḥadīth (ibid., 48); cf. the teachings of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (Massignon, *Essai*, 169), al-Muḥāsibī (van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, 96–98), and the rabbinic "fence around the law" (Hereford, *Pirke Aboth*, 19).

³⁵ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Waraʿ*, 27–29. ³⁶ Ibid., 17. ³⁷ Ṣāliḥ, *Sīra*, 40. ³⁸ Ibid., 53.

³⁹ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Waraʿ*, 48. "Doubtful food" included food bought with ill-gained profits, not simply food that was *ḥarām* in itself. ⁴⁰ Ibid., 84–85. ⁴¹ Ibid., 87.

⁴² For precedents see Lecomte, "Sufyān," 59. ⁴³ Ibn Ḥanbal, *ʿIlal*, I: 18.

considered myself as one under compulsion” (cf. Qur’ān 6: 19). According to Ṣāliḥ, he ate nothing at all while at the palace.⁴⁴ The reason, evidently, was that caliphal wealth was illegitimate. In a family argument about al-Mutawakkil’s gifts, the imam dismissed the precedent of Ibn ‘Umar and Ibn ‘Abbās, who had accepted money from the treasury. “So what?” he said. “Now if I knew that this money had been honestly made, without oppression or wrongful gain, then I wouldn’t care.”⁴⁵ When Ṣāliḥ later accepted the caliph’s stipend, his father stopped taking meals with him. Evidently the “doubtful” character of state income tainted anything bought with it, even food ritually permissible in itself. Even in his last illness, the imam refused to eat a gourd that had been baked in his son’s oven.⁴⁶ When after the Sunni restoration in Ṣāliḥ assumed the office of judge in Iṣfahān, he reportedly wept when the caliph’s letter of appointment was read aloud. He recalled that his father had always urged him to live as an ascetic (*mutaqashshif*), and would be grieved to see him now, garbed in the black robes of an Abbasid official.⁴⁷

As Leah Kinberg has argued, the natural consequence of scrupulosity is *zuhd* (renunciation).⁴⁸ Unlike the mystics, Ibn Ḥanbal did not describe asceticism as a purgative stage through which the believer must pass on his way to experiential knowledge of God. Rather, it was a way to avoid *shubha*, and a form of *summa* in itself. Judging by the Ḥadīth in the *Kitāb al-zuhd*, Ibn Ḥanbal imagined the Prophet to have been an extreme ascetic. He relates that Muḥammad slept on a folded cloak rather than a bed, and suffered from cankered jowls because he had nothing to eat but vine leaves.⁴⁹ In the biographies, Ibn Ḥanbal, apparently in emulation of Muḥammad, denies himself all but the simplest food. “Often he would eat his bread with nothing but vinegar,” reports Ṣāliḥ. “Many times I saw him shake the dust off pieces of dried bread and put them in his bowl. He would pour water on the bread to soften it, and then eat it with salt. I never saw him buy pomegranates, quinces, or any fruit except grapes, dates, and watermelon, which he would eat with bread.”⁵⁰ Like the avoidance of the “dubious” such conspicuous renunciation also distinguished the proto-Sunni community from outsiders. In the *Kitāb al-zuhd*, Ibn Ḥanbal cites reports that predict dire consequences for those believers who succumb to self-indulgence. On Judgement Day, according to the Prophet, those who made a practice of eating butter and honey will be closely questioned.⁵¹

Even as Ibn Ḥanbal’s self-denial distanced him from many of his fellow Muslims, including the caliphs, it brought him closer to the renunciants – that is, to those who were renowned for their *zuhd*, not their Ḥadīth-scholarship. In al-Ma’mūn’s biographies, as we have seen, a nameless ascetic appears again

⁴⁴ Ṣāliḥ, *Sīra*, 59; Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 53. ⁴⁵ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 106. ⁴⁶ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁷ *TH*, 1: 174; see further ch. 2, notes 66 and 170.

⁴⁸ Kinberg, “What is meant by *zuhd*.” Cf. Hurvitz, “Biographies,” on Ṣāliḥ’s “moral message” in depicting his father’s *zuhd*. ⁴⁹ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Zuhd*, I: 47, I: 65.

⁵⁰ Ṣāliḥ, *Sīra*, 40; cf. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Zuhd* I: 45, I: 55. ⁵¹ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Zuhd*, I: 63–64.

and again to criticize the caliph's failure to uphold the *sunna*. Ibn Ḥanbal's biographies mention a similar figure who – as might be expected – provokes the imam's admiration. The first appearance of such a figure in the Ḥanbalī tradition comes in Ṣāliḥ's biography. Narrating for himself, Ibn Ḥanbal reports that a ragged visitor appeared at the door to greet him and to ask: "What is *zuhd*?" Ibn Ḥanbal replied that it is *qīṣarū 'l-amal*, meaning something like "Fear of not entering Heaven." He stood watching the man as he left the alley, and later remarked that he wished Ṣāliḥ had met the man.⁵² If at all genuine, this report suggests that Ibn Ḥanbal appreciated demonstrations of *zuhd* even outside Ḥadīth-circles. In the *Kitāb al-zuhd*, he cites several reports that might have predisposed him to welcome his ragged visitor. In one, the Prophet says: "There are many unkempt, dusty men wrapped in two ragged garments, disdained by all; but who, should they call upon God, would have their wishes granted."⁵³ Even so, the biographical report suggests that an itinerant ascetic (or mystic) was still an exotic object for Ibn Ḥanbal. The report describes the visitor in detail – "a sunburned man wearing a fur pelt, and under it a shirt, carrying no bag, pouch, or stick" – and notes Ibn Ḥanbal's surprise that he has traveled all the way from "the East" equipped in that fashion.

Perhaps, then, al-Ma'mūn was right to suspect a collusion between the *ahl al-sunna* and the "sanctimonious pseudo-ascetics." When the ascetics praise Ibn Ḥanbal, they inevitably mention his defiance of the Inquisition. Obviously, ascetics as well as Ḥadīth-scholars disapproved of the Abbasid caliphate (see further ch. 5). But this disapproval would be dangerous only if the "zealots" could command a popular following, as al-Ma'mūn believed they could. How well, then, do the Ḥanbalī sources support the notion that the proto-Sunnis were rabble-rousers? Of the two family biographers, Ṣāliḥ gives little evidence that the imam had inspired a popular following. Ḥanbal, on the other hand, is more forthcoming. When he went to al-Mu'taṣim's palace on the day of the flogging, he found that "the people had gathered in the square, in the streets, and elsewhere; the markets had closed and the people had assembled."⁵⁴ In his account of the trial, we find al-Mu'taṣim repeating the accusation, first brought by al-Ma'mūn, that Ibn Ḥanbal sought "leadership" (*ri'āsa*).⁵⁵ When the inquisitors argue against the imam's release, they insist that leniency would result in "the perdition of the *amma*," presumably meaning that the common people would cease to fear the caliph's authority.⁵⁶ If at all genuine, these reports suggest that Ibn Ḥanbal had become sufficiently celebrated to inspire a popular uprising, or at least make the caliphs fearful of one.

The caliph's apprehensions notwithstanding, the early Ḥanbalī sources make it clear that Ibn Ḥanbal dissuaded his followers from fomenting disorder. He counseled them merely to avoid the forbidden, not to take active

⁵² Ṣāliḥ, *Sīra*, 46–47.

⁵³ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Zuhd*, I: 59; see also I: 62, top.

⁵⁴ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 67.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

measures to stamp it out. Asked about “enjoining good and forbidding evil,” he replied that rebuking offenders was preferable to using force against them. When al-Marrūdhī complained of a neighbor who was engaged in *munkar*, Ibn Ḥanbal said: “He’s responsible for himself. Disapprove silently (*bi-qalbika*), and leave him alone.” Under no circumstances should one summon the authorities, who might plunder the offender’s property or imprison him for life. Asked whether one might smash musical instruments or pour out wine, Ibn Ḥanbal allowed such action only if the offending items were lying in plain sight. Moreover, he warned against landing oneself in trouble through misplaced zeal, citing a Ḥadīth to the effect that “a believer should not humiliate himself,” that is, place himself in an awkward situation he cannot handle.⁵⁷ Ibn Ḥanbal’s circumspection applied also to relations with the state. Even during the darkest days of al-Wāthiq’s Inquisition, he refused to join a rebellion proposed by fellow Sunnis. Explaining himself, he cited the Prophet’s dictum regarding an unjust ruler: “If he strikes you, be patient; if he plunders you, be patient; if you are subjected to his authority, be patient.”⁵⁸

Admittedly, this sort of quietism reeks of profound disapproval: by enjoining submission to unjust rulers as a matter of principle, Ibn Ḥanbal in effect declared the caliphs unjust. Fahmī Jadʿān (like al-Maʾmūn) reads behind such vigorous disapprobation a willingness to rise against the state.⁵⁹ Some proto-Sunnis, notably al-Khuzāʿī, indeed took that path. But the early Ḥanbalī sources suggest that the imam himself had no such intentions. Of the numerous quietist Ḥadīth cited in the *Dhikr*, most are related by Ḥanbal, Ibn Ḥanbal’s cousin and biographer, not the imam himself.⁶⁰ Given their placement in the *Dhikr*, they evidently served to justify the family’s failure to join the uprising against al-Wāthiq.⁶¹ Doctrinal considerations aside, moreover, quietism was doubtless prudent. Although the caliphal *abnāʾ* might hesitate to take their “pagan-bashers” to the heads of the Ḥanbalīs, the unassimilated Persians and Turks of the second *daʿwa* would not.⁶² For Ibn Ḥanbal, finally, embroilment in factional turmoil would have meant (among other things) ceding some measure of control over his associates, his environment, and his activities. Such a loss of control, one imagines, would have been intolerable to a man bent on reducing his contact with the world to an absolute minimum.

Taken together, the various early sources on the *ahl al-sunna* reveal a complex set of attitudes. Most notably, the proto-Sunnis lived by a stringent

⁵⁷ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Waraʿ*, 154–55; also *Dhikr*, 99. ⁵⁸ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 83.

⁵⁹ He notes that under al-Mutawakkil, the imam was accused of harboring an Alid fugitive (Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 86–88). The Ḥanbalī sources insist that the accusation is false, but Jadʿān is inclined to think it true (*Miḥna*, 285–90). He also proposes that the Alid fugitive was none other than ʿAbd Allāh b. Mūsā, whom al-Maʾmūn reportedly asked to assume the heir apparenacy after al-Riḍā’s death (Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 416–17; see also ch. 3, n. 94). However, Ibn Ḥanbal’s aversion to “Rāfiḍīs,” that is, Shiites who rejected the historical caliphate, makes Jadʿān’s contention unlikely at best (see Ṣāliḥ, *Sīra*, 81; *ThG*, III: 450–51).

⁶⁰ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 89–99. ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 83–84.

⁶² See, e.g., Bughā’s response to the imam’s plight (*HA*, IX: 197–98).

code of pollution and avoidance. As Mary Douglas has suggested, such codes frequently serve the purpose of deterring behavior for which no other sanction exists.⁶³ Ibn Ḥanbal's *Kitāb al-wara'* deals with scrupulosity, not (for example) the penalties for robbery, adultery, and murder. This is because such crimes were punished by the state while self-indulgence and other violations of *sunna* were not. Indeed, it was often the representatives of the state who committed the most egregious violations of *sunna*. To enforce the *sunna* in its entirety, as they believed they should, Ibn Ḥanbal and his followers trained themselves to regard any divergence from it with the most violent repulsion and disgust. They frequently expressed the hope that all Muslims would come to feel similarly, but appear to have resigned themselves to the fact that many would not. As a result, they divided the community into the *ahl al-sunna* and the outsiders, a category that covered everyone from date-eaters to Jahmīs. Such attitudes may give the impression that Ḥanbalism was an aggressive movement bent on vilifying and suppressing anyone who disagreed with its creed.⁶⁴ However, the sources show that Ibn Ḥanbal, at least, preferred simply to be left alone.⁶⁵ Moreover, he counseled his disciples to rectify their own transgressions before condemning those of others. In this way, his relentless suspicion of nearly everything constituted a withdrawal from the world rather than an attack on it.

In his account of the transition from paganism to Christianity in late antiquity, Peter Brown has described feelings of collective aversion as conducive to peaceful coexistence: "Clear-cut enemies and firm codes of avoidance, based on a sharp sense of pollution, can have the effect of protecting religious groups from each other. It gives them room to back off."⁶⁶ Indeed, Ibn Ḥanbal's aloofness from the caliphate appears to have arisen from his aversion to a competing tradition of heirship to the Prophet. Strenuous avoidance, in such a case, amounts to a sort of grudging recognition – or at least an unwillingness to force the issue of who, precisely, the true heirs of the prophets really were. As long as the authorities and the unbelievers kept their distance, it was enough to disapprove "in one's heart." Only when al-Ma'mūn forced the issue did Ibn Ḥanbal and his Sunnis engage in two things for which they had theretofore displayed little inclination: debate matters of theology, and defy the state.

The first *miḥna*-accounts⁶⁷

According to the Ḥadīth-scholar Abū Zur'a (d. 264/878), Ibn Ḥanbal owed his fame first and foremost to his defiance of the Inquisition: "I always hear

⁶³ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 133ff. See also her remarks on ingestion as a metaphor for political absorption (4, and chs. 3 and 10). ⁶⁴ Cf. Laoust, "Ibn Ḥanbal," I: 274–75.

⁶⁵ A typical lament: "I want to go to Mecca and throw myself into one of those ravines where no one has heard of me." *ManIH*, 281. ⁶⁶ Brown, *Authority*, 16–17.

⁶⁷ The most detailed study of Ibn Ḥanbal's trial is Patton's *Aḥmed Ibn Ḥanbal*, based on al-Maqrīzī's *Manāqib*. An excellent overview appears in Hinds, "Miḥna." Recent critical treatments are Jad'ān, *Miḥna*, and *ThG*, III: 446–508, to which my debt will be obvious.

people speaking highly of Ibn Ḥanbal and granting him precedence over [the Ḥadīth-scholars] Yaḥyā b. Maʿīn and Abū Khaythama. It was never that way before the Inquisition. After he was tried, however, his reputation knew no bounds.”⁶⁸ The importance of the *miḥna* is evident from the family biographies, both of which appear to have been written in response to it. For the events that transpired during the reign of al-Maʾmūn, we may compare both biographies to the parallel account in al-Ṭabarī’s *Taʾrikh*.⁶⁹ Taken together, these sources describe the Inquisition in great circumstantial detail – so much so, in fact, that they permit an interpretation of the episode quite different from the later (and now standard) Ḥanbalī one. Specifically, they support Madelung’s argument that Ibn Ḥanbal only gradually came to espouse the dogma of a specifically uncreated Qurʾān.⁷⁰ Even more specifically, they suggest that Ibn Ḥanbal formed this opinion during the course of the Inquisition, and in response to it.

The imam’s uncle Ishāq, cited by his son Ḥanbal, describes the family’s first encounter with the Inquisition. One evening at sunset, a messenger came to summon Ibn Ḥanbal to the house of the neighborhood officer (*ṣāḥib al-rabʿ*), who told him to appear the next day at the hall of the prefect (*dār al-amīr*). As they left the officer’s house, Ishāq suggested that Ibn Hanbal go into hiding. “How could I do that?” he replied, pointing out that the authorities might punish the family and their neighbors. “I don’t want harm to come to anyone on my account, so I’ll just wait and see what happens.”⁷¹ He knew that al-Maʾmūn had already summoned seven scholars to Raqqa and heard their assent to the doctrine of the created Qurʾān. “If only they had borne [their ordeal] and stood fast for God,” the imam remarked, “the matter would have ended there.”⁷²

The next day, Ibn Ḥanbal and a number of other scholars were brought before Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm, the Baghdad prefect. According to al-Ṭabarī, Ishāq read the caliph’s third *miḥna*-letter aloud to the scholars. He then asked them to assent to the contents of a document that he had before him. The document contained a statement to the effect that “nothing is like [God]; nothing in His creation resembles Him in any sense or in any aspect.” The first judge interrogated signified his assent. But then Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm, apparently at his own initiative, began asking the judges a direct question: “Is the Qurʾān created?” The next four men affirmed their obedience to the caliph but would not declare the Qurʾān created in their own words.⁷³ Then, reports al-Ṭabarī, came Ibn Ḥanbal’s turn. He declared the Qurʾān “the speech of God,” and refused to

⁶⁸ *ManIH*, 337–38. ⁶⁹ *TRM*, VI: 631–45.

⁷⁰ Madelung, “Controversy,” 513ff; also Hinds, “Miḥna.” The transition from “not created” to “uncreated” will be studied below; a subsequent stage was from “uncreated” to “eternal,” which follows from the premise that God’s knowledge, which includes the Qurʾān, is eternal (*ThG*, III: 460; and further Jadʿān, *Miḥna*, 25–40). ⁷¹ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 36–37.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 35. Naghsh erroneously emends the list of interrogees to read Aḥmad Ibn Hanbal instead of Aḥmad b. al-Dawraqī (*ibid.*, 35; cf. *TRM*, VIII: 634; and further *ThG*, III: 458).

⁷³ Evidently an instance of *sukūt* (prudent silence): see van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, 113–14.

say more. The prefect then read the document aloud. When he reached the part that said “nothing is like Him,” Ibn Ḥanbal interrupted him to recite: “Nothing is like Him; He is the One who hears and sees” (Qur’ān 42: 11). One of the other scholars, Ibn al-Bakkā’ al-Aṣghar, chimed in with an explanation of the verse, stating that it meant that God hears with an ear and sees with an eye. Ishāq then demanded an explanation from Ibn Ḥanbal, who replied, “I don’t know. He is as He has described himself.”⁷⁴ The family biographies agree with this account of the first interrogation, although Ṣāliḥ portrays one of the caliph’s men as more pugnacious, and Ḥanbal has the imam explain that he was only reciting a verse from the Qur’ān.⁷⁵

Ibn Ḥanbal was not the only scholar to withhold consent at the first interrogation. Many had answered ambiguously, and al-Ma’mūn responded with an angry letter accusing them of hypocrisy, stupidity, and corruption.⁷⁶ After a second round of interrogations, all but four capitulated. Of these, two – al-Qawārīrī and Sajjāda – submitted after being loaded down with fetters. Only Ibn Ḥanbal and Muḥammad b. Nūḥ, a young man with little Ḥadīth-knowledge, continued to resist.⁷⁷ Following the caliph’s orders, Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm dispatched the two dissenters to the Syrian front. During the journey, Ibn Nūḥ urged Ibn Ḥanbal to stand fast despite the caliph’s promise to execute them. Then the news reached them that al-Ma’mūn had died. The new caliph, al-Mu’taṣim, ordered the dissenters sent back to the capital. Ibn Nūḥ fell ill and died on the return journey. Ibn Ḥanbal, still in chains, reached Baghdad on a boat carrying prisoners of war. After a brief confinement in Dār ‘Umāra, he was sent to the commoners’ prison.⁷⁸ His cousin Ḥanbal reports visiting him there and studying with him. He also reports that the imam devised a way to remove one of the fetters on his legs so he could lead the prisoners in prayer. In their discussions, Ibn Ḥanbal still referred only in general terms to the issue of the created Qur’ān: “We were summoned to unbelief, but thank God for his blessing and succour! Praise be to Him for testing His servants in this way.”⁷⁹

Al-Mu’taṣim, whom the sources represent as reluctant to pursue the Inquisition, was apparently willing to leave Ibn Ḥanbal in prison. However, after a period of time variously reported as twenty-eight or thirty months,⁸⁰ the imam was removed and interrogated again. The reason was that his uncle, Ishāq b. Ḥanbal, had gone to the prefect, Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm, to request his release. He reminded the prefect that both their families were descended from the *abnā’* of Marv, and that their ancestors had fought side by side. Ibn Ḥanbal, he continued, had not questioned the Revelation, only disagreed on

⁷⁴ *TRM*, 6: 639. ⁷⁵ Ṣāliḥ, *Sīra*, 49; Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 38.

⁷⁶ *TRM*, VI: 641–42. Ibn Ḥanbal mentions this letter in his account to Ḥanbal (*Dhikr*, 37). Although his memory of the text is inexact, his recollection of the spirit and style of the letter is entirely accurate. ⁷⁷ For what little is known about Ibn Nūḥ, see *ThG*, III: 458.

⁷⁸ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 41–42; Ṣāliḥ, *Sīra*, 52. ⁷⁹ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 42–43.

⁸⁰ Ṣāliḥ, *Sīra*, 52; Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 42; cf. Jad’ān, *Mihna*, 151–52; and *ThG*, III: 462.

its interpretation (*ta'wīl*). He suggested that the prefect summon the scholars (*ulamā'*) and the jurists (*fuqahā'*) – not, Ḥanbal notes, the Ḥadīth-scholars (*ahl al-ḥadīth wa 'l-āthār*) – and let the best argument win. The prefect had agreed. Later, an appalled family friend remonstrated with Iṣḥāq: “How could you do that? Do you want to assemble all your cousin’s enemies against him, so they can prove their case against him?” Iṣḥāq had evidently hoped that his nephew would capitulate. But Ibn Ḥanbal was not to be swayed. When they came to plead with him, he said: “If the scholar assents out of fear, and the ignorant out of ignorance, when will the truth appear?” At this point, his uncle reports that he “gave up.”⁸¹

Following the terms of the agreement, Ibn Ḥanbal was removed from the prison and taken to the house of the prefect to meet with two caliphal representatives. At first, the imam was mystified by his interrogators. They showed him “a picture of the heavens and the earth, and other things.” In response to their questions, he could only reply: “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Then he took the initiative and asked one of the interrogators about “God’s knowledge,” a particular problem for the creationist position. If God is both eternal and omniscient, He must always have known the text of the Qur’ān, which is therefore eternal as well. The interrogator could only aver that God’s knowledge was created. Ibn Ḥanbal then proclaimed him an unbeliever (*kāfir*) and could not be persuaded to retract the accusation.⁸² The prefect made a last effort to persuade him to recant: “Aḥmad, it’s your life at stake! [The caliph] has vowed not to kill you by the sword, but instead to thrash you and cast you into a place where you’ll never see the sun.” He then tried his own theological argument: “Does God not say, ‘We have made it an Arabic Qur’ān’ (43: 3)? If He made it, didn’t he create it?” Ibn Ḥanbal replied with another verse, “He made them like a field of chaff” (105: 5), in which the same verb (*ja‘ala*) clearly means “to make into,” not “to create.” In the face of the imam’s obstinacy, the prefect gave up as well, and ordered him sent to the caliph al-Mu‘taṣim.⁸³

Ibn Ḥanbal was transported to the palace, where he spent the night in confinement. On each of the next three days, he debated with the court scholars in the caliph’s presence. The two family biographies differ slightly on the precise order of events, and on the details of the discussions. On the first day, according to both accounts, Ibn Ḥanbal took the initiative by reciting to the caliph a Ḥadīth summarizing the essential creed of Islam. The implication (made explicit in Ḥanbal’s version) was that if Ibn Ḥanbal had not denied this creed, why should the caliph try him? Al-Mu‘taṣim replied: “If I hadn’t found you already imprisoned by the [caliph] before me, I would not be examining you now.” The judge ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Iṣḥāq (d. 232/846–47), described as

⁸¹ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 43–44.

⁸² In his account, Ṣāliḥ explains the point as follows: “My father said [on some other occasion]: “God’s Names are in the Qur’ān, and the Qur’ān is part of God’s knowledge; so that whoever says that the Qur’ān is created is an unbeliever, and whoever says that God’s Names are created is an unbeliever” (*Sīra*, 53–54). ⁸³ Ṣāliḥ, *Sīra*, 53–54; Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 43–46.

an advocate of *ra'y* and weak in Ḥadīth,⁸⁴ then asked the imam his opinion of the Qur'ān. According to Ḥanbal, he replied: "The Qur'ān is part of God's knowledge. Whoever claims that God's knowledge is created has committed unbelief." Evidently Ibn Ḥanbal had found a *kalām*-style argument to use against his opponents. However, he soon fell back on more familiar tactics. After further exchanges with his interrogators, he pronounced the slogan that he was to repeat on the days that followed. "Give me anything from the Book of God or the *sunna* of his Prophet to make me say that," that is, to prove that the Qur'ān was created. The judge Ibn Abī Du'ād then expressed surprise that the imam admitted only the Qur'ān and *sunna* as evidence.⁸⁵ Ibn Ḥanbal replied that he knew nothing of Ibn Abī Du'ād's "interpretations" (*ta'wīl*), but that they did not constitute grounds for persecuting people. The judge then declared him "misguided, misguiding, and an innovator." Al-Mu'taṣim, however, was not yet convinced, and ordered the discussion to continue. In subsequent exchanges, Ibn Ḥanbal rebutted two arguments derived from the Qur'ān but was forced to concede a point based on Ḥadīth. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ishāq recited a report to the effect that "God wrote the *dhikr*," meaning the Qur'ān. With this text, reports the imam, "he defeated me and I fell silent."⁸⁶

At this point, according to Ṣāliḥ, al-Mu'taṣim ended the session and met privately with Ibn Ḥanbal and 'Abd al-Raḥmān. The latter urged the caliph to be lenient: "For thirty years, [Ibn Ḥanbal] has enjoined obedience to you and approved of the pilgrimage and the holy war under your authority, and has kept to his own house." The caliph admitted that he was impressed with his learning and would like to see him defend Islam at court. "If he would only compromise on whatever small point would resolve this impasse, I would unchain him with my own hands." When Ibn Ḥanbal repeated his demand for proof, the caliph departed. Returned to his cell, Ibn Ḥanbal was visited by two court scholars, but declined to eat when food was served. Ibn Abī Du'ād appeared to ask if he was ready to compromise, but to no avail.⁸⁷

On the second day, Ibn Ḥanbal reports to Ṣāliḥ, "they began talking, one from over here and another from over there, and I would reply to one and then the other. If they cited any speech [or theological argument, *kalām*] not found in the Book of God or the *sunna* of His Prophet, nor in any account [of the Companions], I would say: 'I don't know what you're talking about.'" His opponents then tried to catch him in an error of *fiqh*, but he silenced them by posing them a question about inheritance which they could not answer. Once again he met privately with the caliph and 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ishāq, and later

⁸⁴ Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqāt*, VI: 251; Jad'ān, *Miḥna*, 206.

⁸⁵ Ibn Ḥanbal later described Ibn Abī Du'ād as an ignoramus who relied upon the "Mu'tazilis" from al-Basra to supply him with arguments (*Dhikr*, 51). See further *ThG*, III: 464–65; 481–502. ⁸⁶ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 50, 55; *ThG*, III: 461.

⁸⁷ Ṣāliḥ, *Strā*, 59–60. Ḥanbal's biography places this scene on the afternoon of "the second day" (*Dhikr*, 52) which given the rest of the account can only mean the day after Ibn Ḥanbal went to the palace, not the second day of the interrogations.

with Ibn Abī Duʿād and his two representatives. As before, all efforts to persuade him failed.⁸⁸

Ḥanbal's account does not differentiate clearly between the second and third days of the interrogation, but much of the testimony he cites can be placed on the second day. Two of the interrogators, Burghūth and Shuʿayb, tried to persuade the caliph that Ibn Ḥanbal was an unbeliever who should be executed. Another courtier, Ibn Samāʿa, spoke instead of Ibn Ḥanbal's prominent family, and suggested that he might one day capitulate.⁸⁹ Ibn Ḥanbal reports that the caliph was the kindest of all, saying to him: "I have a loving regard for you, and I've been up all night thinking about you and wondering why it should be my ill fortune to have to deal with you. Fear God and have a care for yourself and your own life!" On the second or perhaps the third day, however, al-Muʿtaṣim accused him (as al-Maʾmūn had) of seeking *riʿāsa* (a popular following).⁹⁰ In response, Ibn Ḥanbal merely repeated his creed: "There's the Qurʾān, and the Ḥadīth of the Prophet, and the reports (*akhbār*) about him. Whatever proof comes from these, I accept." Then the debate turned to anthropomorphism. The interrogators denied that God could see or be seen. They also made claims about His body (that is, His corporeality), adducing arguments Ibn Ḥanbal says he cannot bear to repeat. He also reports that his opponents attacked Ḥadīth. They pointed out that people recite the same reports with different *isnāds*, and that the reports themselves are compromised by fabrications. Ibn Ḥanbal agreed to confine himself to the Qurʾān. By this time, however, Burghūth and Shuʿayb wanted the caliph to execute him. Ibn Abī Duʿād wanted him to capitulate, because he valued the conversion of so tenacious an advocate. As for al-Muʿtaṣim, "he did not know enough to understand what was going on."⁹¹

On the third day, Ibn Ḥanbal was interrogated for the last time. According to Ṣāliḥ, who passes briefly over the end of the ordeal, Ibn Ḥanbal had removed the drawstring of his trousers and used it to lash his fetters together and carry them. On the third day, suspecting that something might happen to him, he replaced the drawstring so that his trousers would not fall. He was interrogated again, and after "much discussion," al-Muʿtaṣim pleaded with

⁸⁸ Ṣāliḥ, *Sīra*, 60–62. According to Ḥanbal, the imam's uncle Ishāq b. Ḥanbal was also present that evening, summoned by the prefect Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm in the hope that he might talk some sense into his nephew. Ishāq b. Ḥanbal apparently stayed until the next day, because he reports that his nephew wanted him to be there "in case he was killed, that I might be present to carry him out." But Ishāq, who reports that he was afraid of having to talk to the caliph, took a seat in an anteroom outside the courtyard, and so did not witness the third and final interrogation (*Dhikr*, 53–55).

⁸⁹ On these figures see *ThG*, III: 463–64 (makes the argument that the interrogators were not Muʿtazilīs, as the family accounts assume).

⁹⁰ Ḥanbal says "the third day," but some of the exchanges he describes correspond to the ones Ṣāliḥ places on the second day. One or the other biographer may be mistaken, or Ḥanbal may again be counting from the day of Ibn Ḥanbal's summons instead of from the first day of the interrogations. Later, however, Ḥanbal calls the last day the third day also (*Dhikr*, 58).

⁹¹ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 57–58.

him to relent. Again he said: "Give me anything from the Book of God or the *sunna* of his Prophet." The caliph then despaired of him and ordered him to be flogged. His shirt was removed, but not torn off, because it contained one or two of the Prophet's hairs bundled in the sleeve. He was then suspended on a wooden framework. One of the officials present told him to hold on to the posts, but he did not understand why and failed to do so. As a result, his wrists were both dislocated during the flogging. "My father," says Ṣāliḥ, "continued to feel pain [in his wrists] until the day he died."

Al-Mu'taṣim ordered the lictors to approach Ibn Ḥanbal one by one, strike two blows, and back away. Twice the caliph left his chair to remonstrate with the prisoner. Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm also tried to reason with him, and 'Ujayf b. 'Anbasa prodded him with the hilt of his sword. At one point 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ishāq stood by and recited the names of all the scholars who had already capitulated. Ibn Ḥanbal only repeated his slogan. After each pause the flogging resumed, with the caliph calling out to the lictors to strike harder. Ibn Ḥanbal was eventually struck over thirty lashes. "Then I lost consciousness," he reports, "and I was aware of nothing until I came to my senses in another room, with my fetters removed."⁹²

Hanbal's account of the same events adds the first articulation of the positive doctrine that the Qur'ān is uncreated. In Ibn Ḥanbal's words: "They said to me: 'Isn't everything other than God a created thing?'" So I said to them: 'Everything other than God is a created thing, but the Qur'ān is His speech, and is not created.'" He then turned to the caliph and said:

These people have no ability to distinguish one thing from another, nor any capacity for clear expression. On what basis do you summon me to agree with them, if not the Book of God and the *sunna* of His Prophet? All they have is an interpretation they have concocted, and an opinion they have offered. The Prophet forbade disputation about the Qur'ān, saying 'Doubt about the Qur'ān is *kufṛ*.' I am not a doubter or a theologian; I am a man of reports and accounts (*āthār wa-akhbār*). So fear God regarding me, and return to Him! By God, had I seen any merit [in what they say], I would have consented to it.⁹³

He relates that al-Mu'taṣim fell silent, and seemed about to relent. But then Ibn Abī Du'ād and Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm huddled around the caliph. Ibn Abī Du'ād declared that Ibn Ḥanbal was "misguided and misleading," an opinion seconded by the "Mu'tazilīs from Basra." Ishāq added that he had "defied two caliphs" and releasing him would mean "the perdition of the *ʿamma*."⁹⁴ It was this line of reasoning, apparently, that proved effective. The caliph, says Ibn Ḥanbal, "grew angry and rude, and resolved to have me flogged." It nevertheless appears that he once more urged Ibn Ḥanbal to relent. When his efforts failed, he said: "God damn you! I had hopes that you might give in." Ibn Ḥanbal states that he was then stripped of his shirt and placed between the posts. He adds that he rebuked the caliph, warning him against spilling the

⁹² Ṣāliḥ, 62–65.

⁹³ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 60.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*.

blood of Muslims, and citing an appropriate Ḥadīth. Again the caliph hesitated, but again gave in to the “Mu‘tazilīs,” who were crying out that he was a *kāfir* (unbeliever).

In Ḥanbal’s account of the flogging, we also learn that the imam lost consciousness more than once. “When they stopped striking me, I regained consciousness. They would stop whenever I slumped and relaxed. I passed out and came to several times.” Even so, he is able to report on what transpired among the inquisitors in the meantime. “I heard [al-Mu‘taṣim] say to Ibn Abī Du‘ād, ‘I don’t know what to do about that man.’” When Ibn Ḥanbal passed out again, after being struck thirty-three or thirty-four times, al-Mu‘taṣim, who appeared frightened by the thought of killing him (*ka-annahu ar‘abahu dhālik*), ordered him taken down. Ibn Abī Du‘ād now urged that he be imprisoned again because he would stir up the people. But the caliph, “who had more pity” for him “than the whole lot of them,” ordered him to be released.⁹⁵

Ḥanbal, who had gone to the palace gate and was waiting in the anteroom, reports that a crowd had gathered in the square and in the streets. His cousin emerged dressed in clothes the caliph had given him, riding with Ibn Abī Du‘ād on his right and Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm on his left. The officials pulled back his hood to show his face to the people in the anteroom and then conveyed him to the Tigris and put him on a boat. He was carried to Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm’s residence, and his uncle, his neighbors, and the local notables were summoned to identify him. He then prayed the noon prayer. Ibn Samā‘a, one of the court theologians, objected that he should not do so while bleeding. The imam retorted that ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb had prayed while wounded, and Ibn Samā‘a fell silent. At sunset, the imam was conveyed to his own house. Ḥanbal reports: “When he reached the door of the house, he tried to dismount, and I put my arm around him. Without my realizing it, my hand touched on a wound, and he cried out in pain. I pulled my hand back, and he dismounted leaning on me.” Inside, the imam “threw himself down face forward on the bed unable to move. But he had the clothes that had been given to him removed. They were sold and he gave the money away in charity.”⁹⁶

After reporting the events of Ibn Ḥanbal’s chastisement, his biographers pause to clarify the points of *fiqh* it raises. Šāliḥ cites his father’s statements that the Qur’ān is uncreated and that anyone who disagrees should be beheaded if he does not repent. He also quotes his father as condemning those who say only that the Qur’ān is the speech of God, even though, as we have seen, this is the view he himself expressed at his first interrogation. For Ḥanbal, the three pressing polemical concerns are the question of capitulation under duress, the question of forgiving the inquisitors, and the question of resistance to the government. Torture, flogging, and fettering, Ibn Ḥanbal comments, constitute “duress” (*kurh*; Qur’ān 16: 106), but threats and imprisonment do not. The implication is that Sajjāda and al-Qawāriri were blame-

⁹⁵ Ibid., 63–65.

⁹⁶ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 67–68.

less in their capitulation, but those who submitted without being chained or flogged are culpable. As to why he forgave his inquisitors, Ibn Ḥanbal states: “It does you no good to have your Muslim brother suffer on your account. Rather, forgive him and overlook his offense, that God may pardon you, as He has promised to do.” Finally, Ḥanbal confronts the problem of his cousin’s attitude toward the government. He lists twenty-five Ḥadīths, all going back to the Prophet, to the effect that Muslims should submit to the authority of their leaders (*umārāʾ*). Leaders may be disobeyed if they command disobedience to God, but under no circumstances should one take arms against the government. Interestingly, Ibn Ḥanbal is quoted as reciting only three of these himself.⁹⁷ The rest his cousin and biographer must have collected on his own as a justification for the imam’s position.

The addition of Ḥadīth to support Ibn Ḥanbal’s opinions marks the beginning of the process by which he came to be credited with a fully articulated position on all the issues raised by the Inquisition. In the biography by Ṣāliḥ, he condemns anyone who declares the Qurʾān to be the speech of God and then “stops,” that is, refuses to elaborate.⁹⁸ Yet this had been precisely his response at the first interrogation by Ishāq b. Ibrāḥīm. Only after his imprisonment did Ibn Ḥanbal use theological arguments, like the one about God’s knowledge. Later, he was still reluctant to debate theology, and constantly reminded his interlocutors that he would accept only the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth as evidence. But the need to defend himself appears to have compelled him to give more thought to the matter than he had before. By the time of his final interrogation, he was able to make a positive declaration of the uncreatedness of the Qurʾān. When he later recounted the event for Ḥanbal, the imam said that he could not repeat his opponents’ arguments because his tongue would not obey him. In the *Radd ʿalā al-zanādiqa wa ʿl-jahmīya*, however, he not only repeats the arguments but refutes them. By the time the *Radd* was composed, he and his disciples (or perhaps just the latter) had worked out a philosophically respectable defense of all their views, including the ones al-Maʾmūn had decried as anthropomorphic. Evidently, the imam’s associates used the *Radd* to place in his mouth the arguments he should have made against the caliph’s scholars. The Ḥadīth-based arguments cited in the biographies may well have been supplied by the imam himself. But the *kalām*-arguments in the *Radd* can only have originated with later, more sophisticated advocates of *tashbīh*.

The capitulation reports

In his discussion of Ibn Hanbal’s *miḥna*, van Ess concludes that he must have capitulated. Otherwise, al-Muʿtaṣim would never have released him. To conceal or mitigate the scandal, Ṣāliḥ and Ḥanbal claimed that he had fainted

⁹⁷ Ibid., 83, 96, 98.

⁹⁸ Ṣāliḥ, *Strā*, 77. The only correct declaration is: “The Qurʾān is the speech of God, uncreated.”

under the lash.⁹⁹ In itself, however, the imam's loss of consciousness is plausible. According to the family accounts, he had eaten little or nothing for three days and then was struck some thirty blows with a whip. But the question remains: why was he released? Here too, the family accounts are believable enough. The caliph tried him only reluctantly, and at least one of the inquisitors ('Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ishāq) was openly sympathetic to him. He was flogged only because Ibn Abī Du'ād and Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm insisted on it; and neither of these men is represented as seeking his execution. Even Ibn Abī Du'ād reportedly urged the caliph to return him to prison. Moreover, the caliph appeared afraid to kill him. Indeed, he may have thought that the imam was likely to die of his injuries in any event. If these accounts are accurate, even in part, it appears that Ibn Ḥanbal could defy the Inquisition and still escape with his life. Even so, van Ess' argument has two salient bodies of evidence in its favor. First, there are the non-Ḥanbalī accounts that insist that the imam capitulated. Second, there are the Ḥanbalī accounts that insist, with suspiciously mythographic elaboration, that he did not.

The first capitulation-account appears in al-Jāḥiẓ's essay on the *khalq al-Qur'ān*. The author, a Mu'tazilī and a supporter of the *miḥna*, is hardly a neutral observer. But his account agrees with the Ḥanbalī ones on many points of fact, if not of interpretation. The family accounts admit that the imam often confessed ignorance in the face of his opponents' arguments. For Ṣāliḥ and Ḥanbal, this concession is immaterial because the arguments in question ignored the Qur'ān and the *sunna*. In al-Jāḥiẓ's account, however, Ibn Ḥanbal's recalcitrance merely illustrates his perversity. An example is his response to a simple syllogism proposed by Ibn Abī Du'ād. Everything is either eternal or created; the Qur'ān is a thing; only God is eternal; therefore the Qur'ān must be created. "I'm no theologian," is Ibn Ḥanbal's response.¹⁰⁰ In another passage, the inquisitors demand that Ibn Ḥanbal adduce some evidence from the Qur'ān and Hadīth (and in one recension, "rational argument"), but he cannot. Although this allegation seems the opposite of what the family accounts claim, it is plausible. The Qur'ān and Ḥadīth contain no evidence either way for the createdness of the Book. Knowing this, the inquisitors might well have asked Ibn Ḥanbal to adduce proof for its *uncreatedness* from those sources, something he could no more do than they could do the reverse.

So far, al-Jāḥiẓ's account works well enough as an unsympathetic account of the events described in the Ḥanbalī reports. However, the exchange that allegedly prompted the flogging has no parallel in the family biographies. A dispute arose, says al-Jāḥiẓ, over the phrase "the Lord of the Qur'ān," which Ibn Ḥanbal claimed never to have heard. It was at that point that the caliph decided that he was a liar and resolved to flog him. Al-Jāḥiẓ then declares that Ibn Ḥanbal *when he capitulated* could not have been practicing prudential dissimulation (*taqīya*). This wording assumes common agreement that Ibn

⁹⁹ *ThG*, III: 464–65.

¹⁰⁰ Jāḥiẓ, *Rasā'il*, III: 293.

Ḥanbal did submit to the caliph.¹⁰¹ Moreover, it implies that he justified his submission later on the grounds of *taqīya*. According to the Qurʾān, a believer under duress (*man ukriha*) may speak *kufṛ* so long as he repudiates it in his heart (Qurʾān 16: 106). In the family accounts, Ibn Ḥanbal states that beating and torture constitute *kurh*. If the imam did capitulate, then, he could have argued that he did so under duress.

The biographies contain no indication that Ibn Ḥanbal ever made this argument. Nevertheless, someone appears to have done so, because al-Jāḥiẓ felt compelled to rebut it. He does so by claiming that a believer cannot practice dissimulation among fellow believers. Moreover, Ibn Ḥanbal was never in sufficient danger to justify *taqīya*: “He was never confronted with a brandished sword, nor was he struck any more than thirty times with an untipped whip with frayed ends, before he made his clear declaration of capitulation, and repeatedly at that.”¹⁰² In the family reports, when Ibn Ḥanbal states that he lost consciousness during the flogging, he uses the expression *dhahaba ʿaqlī*, “I fainted,” which might also mean “I lost control of myself” or “I didn’t know what I was doing.” One might suppose, then, that he made some concession while semi-conscious. But this is inconsistent with al-Jāḥiẓ’ description of “a clear declaration of capitulation” made “repeatedly.”

An author of the next generation, the universal historian al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 284/898), provides an account of Ibn Ḥanbal’s Inquisition that is even more divergent from the family accounts. As an Alid-sympathetic and (apparently) pro-Abbasid writer, al-Yaʿqūbī can be expected to have had little sympathy for Sunnis and their causes. His report, which is unattributed, states that Ibn Ḥanbal capitulated, but not because of the beating. Rather, an argument offered by one of his interrogators persuaded Ibn Ḥanbal to concede that the Qurʾān must be created. Under questioning, he allegedly protested: “I am a man who has acquired knowledge of a certain kind, and that knowledge did not include this.” When “a number of lashes” proved ineffectual, the police prefect Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm asked permission to take over the debate:

“This knowledge you learned,” said Iṣḥāq. “Did an angel bring it down to you, or did you learn it from men?”

“From men, of course.”

“Bit by bit, or all at once?”

“Bit by bit.”

“So is there anything left you haven’t learned yet?”

“There is.”

¹⁰¹ As noted by Hinds, “Miḥna.”

¹⁰² Jāḥiẓ, *Rasāʾil*, III: 295–96. Al-Jāḥiẓ adds: “Furthermore, he was not being held in a closed session, nor was his condition hopeless, nor was he weighed down with fetters, nor had he been intimidated with ferocious threats. In fact, he had been questioned most politely, but had answered most rudely. They [sc. his interrogators] were dignified, while he was flippant; and they were forbearing, while he was cavalier.” In both family accounts, we are told that before the flogging, the caliph examined the whips and ordered them exchanged for different ones. Neither account states what type of whips were eventually brought.

“Well then: this is one of the things you don’t know yet, and the Commander of the Believers is informing you of it now.”

“Then I concur with what the Commander of the Believers says (*fa-innī aqūlu bi-qawli amīri ‘l-mu‘minīn*).”

“Regarding the createdness of the Qur’ān?”

“Regarding the createdness of the Qur’ān.”

So they had people bear witness to this, and they conferred honors on [Ibn Ḥanbal] and let him go back to his own house.¹⁰³

For a supporter of “caliphal imamism,” Ishāq’s argument as given by al-Ya’qūbī would have represented the correct position, namely, that the caliph enjoys the right to make doctrinal pronouncements on his own authority. But the family accounts make no mention of any such argument being offered. Even had it been, it is unlikely that Ibn Ḥanbal would have conceded such a point so easily. It is also unlikely that Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm would have been the one to make the argument. Ishāq, unlike the other inquisitors, was a police official, not a theologian. Admittedly, the family accounts show him debating briefly with Ibn Ḥanbal during the latter’s incarceration at his house. But on that occasion, at least, Ishāq’s argument was based on Qur’ānic verses, not caliphal imamism, and Ibn Ḥanbal refuted him in any case.¹⁰⁴

The last report of a capitulation appears in a much later source, the *Tabaqāt al-Mu‘tazila* of Ibn al-Murtaḍā (d. 840/1437). Its account of Ibn Ḥanbal’s trial is dubious, not least because it contains speeches invented to refute later criticisms of the Inquisition. One such criticism was that if early Muslims were not examined on the matter, why should later generations be?¹⁰⁵ In his report, Ibn al-Murtaḍā allows Ibn Abī Du‘ād to rebut this claim. He argues that the Prophet, Companions, and Successors said nothing about the createdness of the Qur’ān because no one in their day voiced the wrong view. Ibn Ḥanbal, however, is “the head of a school (*madhhab*) who has assembled the common populace and the riffraff, who shout in the streets that ‘Nothing of God’s is created, and the Qur’ān is of God.’” This declaration will lead the ignorant to regard the Qur’ān as the Christians regard Jesus.¹⁰⁶ Ibn al-Murtaḍā also insists on the unlikely notion that al-Mu‘taṣim was a convinced Mu‘tazilī, and grants him more intelligent involvement in the interrogation than do previous reports of the event. The description of the end of the trial is essentially the same as that offered by al-Jāhīz. The exasperated caliph says to Ibn Ḥanbal: “You dispute, but whenever you are proven wrong, you say, ‘I am no theologian.’” Ibn al-Murtaḍā leaves no doubt that Ibn Ḥanbal capitulated: after thirty-eight lashes, “he confessed to the createdness of the Qur’ān.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Ya’qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, II: 576–77. This is one of the few extant early histories to mention the flogging of Ibn Ḥanbal. Al-Mas’ūdī states only that “al-Mu‘taṣim struck Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal thirty-three lashes to make him assert the createdness of the Qur’ān” (*li-yaqūla bi-khalqī l-Qur’ān*; *MDh*, IV: 52). Hinds takes this to mean that Ibn Ḥanbal capitulated (“Miḥna”).

¹⁰⁴ Šālih, *Sīra*, 54.

¹⁰⁵ In an apocryphal tale, it was this argument that persuaded al-Wāthiq to stop the Inquisition (see *ThG*, III: 502–04).

¹⁰⁶ An argument evidently taken from al-Ma’mūn’s *miḥna*-letters (*TRM*, 8: 635).

¹⁰⁷ Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Tabaqāt al-mu‘tazila*, 122–25.

The Ḥanbalī response

Ibn Ḥanbal's advocates never cite these capitulation reports, even to refute them.¹⁰⁸ Yet they do appear to be writing against them. The *Ṭabaqāt* attributed to Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845) declares that Ibn Ḥanbal "refused to say" that the Qur'ān was created, and so "was subjected to an ordeal and flogged." While in prison awaiting punishment, "he remained steadfast in his view and did not capitulate to them regarding anything whatsoever."¹⁰⁹ This declaration, vehement as it is, leaves open the possibility that he did capitulate, albeit not while in prison.

For their part, the family biographies say that he "lost his wits," an expression van Ess reads as a subterfuge. Of the two accounts, Ḥanbal's does a better job of explaining the motives of the inquisitors and their eventual decision to release the imam. However, it is Ṣāliḥ's account, not Ḥanbal's, that appears in most later treatments of the Inquisition. Van Ess has speculated that Ḥanbal's account was compromised by its reliance on the testimony of Ishāq b. Ḥanbal, the imam's uncle and the biographer's father. It was Ishāq who made the request to the governor that Ibn Ḥanbal be released in order to debate. Moreover, only Ḥanbal's account contains an admission of defeat on the imam's part ("when 'Abd al-Raḥmān cited the Ḥadīths of al-Yamāmī and Ibn 'Ar'ara, he confuted me and I fell silent").¹¹⁰

Apart from their relative merits, however, neither of the family accounts, even if we presume them entirely accurate, could suffice as a response to the Inquisition. The reason is that the trial failed to produce a conclusive result as far as the Qur'ān was concerned. Certainly, Ibn Ḥanbal's reported willingness to be beaten to death served as a token of the rightness of his position, and was understood as such by his followers. But the notions of determinative evidence current among transmitters of polemical narratives demanded more explicit proof. Contemporary biographical literature gives the impression that "proof" consisted – in ascending order of persuasiveness – of evidentiary dreams, conversion of the opponent, and a sign from God.¹¹¹ The family accounts, and the testimony on which they are based, contain gestures toward all of these, but no more. On the assumption that Ibn Ḥanbal's doctrine was the correct one – or perhaps more exactly, that the inquisitors' was the wrong one – Ḥanbalī transmitters had to supply the "proofs" that the trial itself had not. Although the resulting accounts cannot be definitively dated, several appear to have been constructed specifically to supply the deficiencies in others. To the extent this dependence can be demonstrated on stylistic

¹⁰⁸ Ibn al-Jawzī mentions that "other accounts of the flogging-episode have reached us which we do not consider authentic and have therefore eschewed" (*Manīḥ*, 337). Hinds, "Miḥna," understands this to refer to the capitulation-reports.

¹⁰⁹ Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, VII: 354. Ibn Sa'd was himself examined by the Inquisition, and capitulated (*TRM*, VI: 634; Ḥanbal, *Dhiḥr*, 35). He died eleven years before Ibn Ḥanbal. This entry, which mentions the imam's death, is thus the work of a later hand, at least in part.

¹¹⁰ Ḥanbal, *Dhiḥr*, 50, 55; *ThG*, III: 456, 461–62. Parts of Ḥanbal's account do reappear in Maqdisī, *Miḥna* (*ThG* IV: 758, notes to III: 456; and further below).

¹¹¹ Cf. Cooper, "Purported Autobiography."

grounds, the reports can be placed in relative order. Any ordering based on the above criteria is necessarily speculative, and admittedly partakes of a certain degree of circularity. However, we do have another, broader chronology to work with: the order of the appearance of the reports in composite accounts attributable to known authors. At the very least, then, it is possible to reconstruct the stages of the representation of the *miḥna* in biographical compilations, even if we cannot specify the provenance of each report.

The first reports of the flogging would have been those that circulated among the “crowd” (*al-nās*) who, according to Ḥanbal, had gathered “in the square and in the streets.” Such evanescent narratives would have been displaced, perhaps in a matter of days or even hours, by the reports of those closer to the action. Under these circumstances, the privileged reports for later biographers would have been those related by Ibn Ḥanbal and his family. Outside this circle, observers sympathetic to Ibn Ḥanbal would have narrated their own recollections of the event, and – to authenticate and ennoble their stories – combined them with whatever information they could glean from the testimony of those closer to the action than themselves. Such a scenario, at least, explains the features of the account attributed to one Abū ‘Imrān Mūsā b. al-Ḥasan al-Baghdādī and preserved in the *Kitāb al-miḥan* of Abū al-‘Arab (d. 333/944).

The *Kitāb al-miḥan* is a compilation of short tales about Muslims who suffered death, imprisonment, or torture at the hands of other Muslims in defense of the faith. Abū ‘Imrān’s report reads as if he had heard a second- or third-hand description of the trial and used it as the basis of an “eyewitness account.”¹¹² He condenses the disputation into a few pithy slogans and moves quickly to the flogging, stating that one of the lictors “struck [Ibn Ḥanbal] two blows that split open his midriff, and his entrails spilled out.”¹¹³ But the imam remained steadfast:

As he hung between the whipping-posts, having already been beaten but not yet released, with his head hanging low, his uncle approached him and said, “Nephew! Say the Qur’ān is created but do it as an act of dissimulation!” Aḥmad lifted his head and told him, “Uncle, I tried my soul against the whip, and endured; I tried my soul against the sword, and endured; but when I tried my soul against Hell, I could not bear the thought.”¹¹⁴

Abū ‘Imrān’s explanation of Ibn Ḥanbal’s release is even more incredible: he claims that messengers arrived from Khurasan and Yemen to urge the caliph to free the imam because the provinces had revolted. This falsehood, like the ones that precede it, inspires little confidence that Abū ‘Imrān was actually present at the flogging. However, his report does offer a plausible recollection of how events might have appeared to the crowd outside:

¹¹² Tamīmī, *Miḥan*, 438–44.

¹¹³ The family accounts specify that the blows did not cause internal injuries (Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 68).

¹¹⁴ According to Ḥanbal’s biography, the imam’s uncle was indeed present, but cowering (by his own admission) in the anteroom.

The [notable] people and the commoners gave a cry. Then the lictors emerged, saying that Aḥmad was dead. They told the commoners that he had been lying prone when they removed his irons . . . Then [al-Mu'taṣim], the enemy of God, emerged from the palace with Ibn Abī Du'ād, the heretic, amid a huge escort. The commoners blocked [the caliph's] route to the bridge, making him fear for his life. They shouted distressing things at him, and said, "You killed Aḥmad!" He replied, "But Aḥmad is alive!"

Abū 'Imrān concludes his testimony by relating two dreams in which the angel Gabriel appeared and pointed out Ibn Abī Du'ād and his allies as "ungrateful" and Ibn Ḥanbal and his allies as "another people who will not be ungrateful" (Qur'ān 6: 89).¹¹⁵ This coda, along with the identification of the caliph as "the enemy of God" and of Ibn Abī Du'ād as a "heretic," make it amply clear that the Inquisition stirred passions that found little expression in the sober family biographies. Because almost nothing is known about Abū 'Imrān,¹¹⁶ we cannot tell whether he was a real eyewitness, or whether he served as a peg on which to hang a later account fabricated in the heat of anti-Mu'tazilī polemic. But the combination of accurate detail and wild supposition suggests that the tale reflects the impression of those who gathered at the palace during the flogging.

Abū 'Imrān's report sheds little light on the matter of whether Ibn Ḥanbal actually capitulated (if anything, it corroborates al-Jāhīz' implication that he did and later claimed to be practicing *taqīya*). But it does prepare us to understand why many observers, then and later, would exert such efforts to affirm that he did not. Even for so creative a narrator as Abū 'Imrān, Ibn Ḥanbal's release posed a problem. His solution – the sudden appearance of couriers from the provinces – amounts to an admission that the imam's own testimony could not adequately explain why he was released. Abū 'Imrān's lame explanation also suggests that, despite the claims we will find in other reports, the unruliness of the crowd played no role in the caliph's decision. Had the crowd actually threatened to storm the palace, as later reports will claim, we would expect Abū 'Imrān of all people to say so. Why invoke "revolt in the provinces" when he could invoke an unruly mob right in front of the palace? The fact that he did not implies that the crowd was not so unruly after all, and that despite his free hand with the flogging-reports, Abū 'Imrān was at least faithful to his recollections of the scene outside.

Not surprisingly, none of Ibn Hanbal's later biographers made use of Abū 'Imrān's awkward pastiche of a report. The biographers might have overlooked or eliminated the more obvious fabrications had it served their purpose to do so, but there was no need: they had at their disposal another, more polished explanation. The earliest extant version of it is ascribed to one Aḥmad b. al-Faraj and appears in the *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* of Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (d.

¹¹⁵ On dreams of this type, see Kinberg, "Legitimation," esp. 58–68.

¹¹⁶ His biographical notice in *TB*, XIII: 48 (no. 7012), is short and unhelpful.

430/1038).¹¹⁷ In its claims about the flogging, the report is no more credible than Abū 'Imrān's. But, unlike Abū 'Imrān, Ibn al-Faraj explains his presence inside the palace, describes at least the semblance of a theological disputation, and, above all, offers not one but four distinct explanations for Ibn Ḥanbal's release.

At the time of the *miḥna*, reports Ibn al-Faraj, he was working for the government. One day, he noticed "that people had locked up their shops and taken up weapons."¹¹⁸ Told that Ibn Ḥanbal was being tried, he went to the palace and persuaded the chamberlain to admit him. He was given a seat near al-Mu'taṣim's chair. When Ibn Ḥanbal was brought in, the caliph accused him of claiming that God speaks as human beings do, and that the Qur'ān is His uncreated speech. Ibn Hanbal replied with a Ḥadīth describing God's speech to Moses, but the caliph rejected it as a lie. The imam then adduced a verse from the Qur'ān (32: 13) in which God refers to "my true speech." Al-Mu'taṣim turned to the vizier Ibn al-Zayyāt¹¹⁹ and to Aḥmad Ibn Abī Du'ād and bade them reply. "Commander of the Believers, kill him," they said, "and let his blood be upon our necks." The caliph struck Ibn Ḥanbal in the face and knocked him down. At this point, the Khurasani commanders evinced dismay. Ibn al-Faraj explains that Ibn Ḥanbal's father "had been the son of a Khurasani commander,¹²⁰ and the caliph became fearful of what [the Khurasanis] might do to him; so he called for a pitcher and had [Ibn Ḥanbal's] face sprinkled with water." When he came to his senses, Ibn Ḥanbal asked his uncle whether the water sprinkled on him was rightfully taken from its owner. This show of scrupulosity apparently enraged the caliph, who vowed to beat Ibn Ḥanbal to death. Nevertheless, Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm managed to intervene. He approached Ibn Ḥanbal and told him that the caliph had retracted his opinion and had now declared simply that "There is no God but God." When Ibn Ḥanbal repeated the declaration of faith, Ishāq returned to the caliph and reported that he (the caliph) and the imam had now espoused the same doctrine. Al-Mu'taṣim then ordered the imam set free.

Ibn al-Faraj's report contradicts the family accounts, and itself, in many critical details. The report describes al-Mu'taṣim as meeting Ibn Ḥanbal for the first time and flogging him all during the same session. This contradicts Ibn al-Faraj's own claim that the trial begun at least a day before he saw any of it. Moreover, no previous report mentions the Ḥadīth or the verse among those Ibn Ḥanbal is supposed to have adduced. Even if we assume that the

¹¹⁷ *HA*, IX: 204–05. *TB* contains five persons with the name Aḥmad b. al-Faraj. Of those with known death-dates, only two could have witnessed the flogging: Abū 'Uṭba al-Ḥijāzī (d. 271) and Zarqān (d. 282). Ibn Ḥanbal's son 'Abd Allāh reportedly related Ḥadīth from Abū 'Uṭba, who is also described as a drunkard and a liar (*TB*, V: 100–02; no. 7484).

¹¹⁸ Cf. above, p. 46.

¹¹⁹ Abū Ja'far Muḥammad (d. 233/847–48), vizier to al-Mu'taṣim and al-Wāthiq. His presence here is an anachronism.

¹²⁰ *Min abnā' quwwād Khurāsān*; cf. *TB*, V: 181 (no. 2632): *kān min abnā' al-da'wa*. On the Khurasani component of Sunni resistance to the caliphate, see above, pp. 39, 47–48.

exchange Ibn al-Faraj gives was one of many elided in the other accounts, we are still left with an extraordinarily brief and one-sided disputation. No other report mentions Ibn al-Zayyāt or the Khurasani commanders, much less a caliph who disputes Ḥadīth and slaps the imam. Admittedly, al-Ya‘qūbī also credits Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm with breaking the impasse. But the strategy Ibn al-Faraj attributes to the police chief is entirely different: in a comic turn, he has Ishāq trick each party into believing that the other has capitulated. Clever as it is, the story is impossible on internal grounds. In order for the deception to work, neither al-Mu‘taṣim nor Ibn Ḥanbal can be allowed to hear Ishāq’s exchanges with the other party. How then could Abū al-Faraj, who is seated near the caliph, overhear both?

As if aware that his account appears contrived, Ibn al-Faraj proceeds to strengthen it in three ways. First, he overdetermines the caliph’s release of Ibn Ḥanbal by bringing in the mob that appeared briefly at the beginning of the report.

[Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm] noticed something at the door, and said, “I’m going out to see what all that commotion is.” He went out, came back in, and said: “Commander of the Believers! The crowd (*al-mala’*) is plotting to kill you. As a sincere counselor, I advise you to let Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal go.” So [Ibn Ḥanbal] was sent out, with his shirt and his cowl in his hands.

Second, he dispels any suspicion that may have arisen that Ibn Ḥanbal did indeed capitulate, or that the caliph’s chastisement induced the imam to change his position on the Qur’ān:

I was the first to reach the door. The people said [to Ibn Ḥanbal], “Tell us what you said, so that we know what to believe.”

“What do you think I said?” replied Ibn Ḥanbal. “Write this down, you Ḥadīth-scholars (*aṣḥāb al-akhbār*), and bear witness, members of the common people (*ma‘shar al-‘amma*): the Qur’ān is the uncreated speech of God, and inseparable from him!”

Finally, he adds a miracle-tale that serves the same purpose as the Gabriel-dreams in Abū ‘Imrān’s account, namely, to spell out that God has ratified Ibn Ḥanbal’s position.¹²¹ To do so, he makes use of a detail that appears in the family accounts but remains undeveloped there. Afraid that the flogging might destroy his clothing and expose his nakedness, the imam replaced his trouser-cord, which he had been using to carry his fetters. In Ibn al-Faraj’s report, the drawstring returns, like Chekov’s famous pistol, to serve as the prop in the last act of the drama:

I was watching Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal as the blows fell on his shoulders. He was wearing trousers held up with a cord. The cord broke and the trousers slipped down. I noticed him move his lips, and the trousers were restored. [Later] I asked him about this and he said, “When the trousers slipped I said, ‘God, my God and Lord, you have stood with

¹²¹ By “miracle” in this and the next chapter I mean *karāma*, a change in the natural order effected by God in response to prayer by a *walī* (for which see below, pp. 141ff.).

me in this place; so do not expose me in public view.' Then the trousers were restored."¹²²

Abū Nu'aym, the compiler of the *Hilya*, deems the account of Abū al-Faraj less accurate than Ṣāliḥ's. Yet he adduces a report corroborating this, the most implausible part of it. In this second report, the imam reports his prayer as follows: "If I am in the right, then do not expose my nakedness."¹²³ What was only implied in the Ibn al-Faraj version is here stated explicitly: if God performs miracles for the imam, it can only be because his opinion on the Qur'ān is the correct one.

The adduction of miracle-stories, a new development in the representation of Ibn Ḥanbal, appears to be a response to the perceived inconclusiveness of the trial. Admittedly, Ibn Ḥanbal was released; but neither al-Mu'taṣim nor any of the interrogators was converted to his view. Add to this the possibility that he may have capitulated after all, a possibility that even sympathetic observers appear to have taken seriously. Even Ibn al-Faraj, who is clearly on the imam's side, concedes that something like a capitulation did occur. Audiences needed a more plausible explanation for Ibn Ḥanbal's release, and, more importantly perhaps, unambiguous evidence that God endorsed the imam's position. Taken on its own, the trouser-tale accomplishes this admirably, if only because it draws attention away from the question of a possible capitulation. Whether Ibn Ḥanbal remained steadfast to the end does not matter so much if it can be proven that his opinion was the right one. On the other hand, the trouser-tale has its problems too: why does no one but the narrator ever notice the miracle? Later biographers appear to have realized this, and to have exploited the story, in ever more skillful variations, to construct increasingly dense fictions about the end of Ibn Ḥanbal's trial.

Before turning to the subsequent fate of the Ibn al-Faraj report, we should consider another purported eyewitness account which also includes a miracle-tale. This is the full-blown fiction attributed to Sulaymān b. 'Abd Allāh al-Sijzī and preserved in the *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila* of Ibn Abī Yā'la al-Farrā' (526/1133).¹²⁴ Sulaymān reports that he went to the palace and found "the people crowded around the gate, as if it were a festival day." He entered the palace and stood next to the caliph's chair. Al-Mu'taṣim "entered, took his shoes off, and crossed his legs." He told Ibn Ḥanbal not to fear, and the imam replied that he was not frightened "one little bit." Ibn Ḥanbal then argued against the createdness of the Qur'ān by citing Qur'ānic verses in which the word "created" (*makhlūq*) does *not* appear. (The insistence of every "eyewitness" on inventing a new argument says much for their resourcefulness but not their credibility.) The caliph ordered him to be imprisoned, and the next day asked him how he had spent the night. He replied that he found himself unable to recite a certain verse of the Qur'ān, and then discovered why: in the corner

¹²² *HA*, IX: 204–05. ¹²³ *Ibid.*, IX: 196.

¹²⁴ *ṬH*, I: 162–67. The entry on Sulaymān contains no information about him other than this report.

of his cell was a dead Qurʾān. “So I washed it, wrapped it, prayed over it, and buried it.” Al-Muʿtaṣim cried out for an explanation of this bizarre story, and Ibn Ḥanbal replied: “Well, you’re the one who says it’s created – and every created thing dies!” The caliph conceded defeat, but then Aḥmad b. Abī Duʿād and Bishr al-Marīsī¹²⁵ suggested that the caliph kill Ibn Ḥanbal. Al-Muʿtaṣim replied that he had promised God not to behead him, so the Muʿtazilīs proposed that he flog him to death instead. After three strokes came the miracle, here contextualized as the reason for Ibn Ḥanbal’s (temporary) deliverance: “As [the lictor] prepared to strike the fourth blow, I noticed that [Ibn Ḥanbal’s] sash had started to slip down. He lifted his face to the heavens and moved his lips. The earth split open and two hands emerged to restore his garment by the power of God Almighty. When al-Muʿtaṣim saw this, he said: ‘Let him go!’” Apparently unmoved, Ibn Abī Duʿād said to Ibn Ḥanbal: “Whisper to me that the Qurʾān is created, and I’ll save you from the caliph.” The imam replied: “Whisper in my ear that it isn’t, and I’ll save you from Hell.”

The next day, the caliph again asked Ibn Ḥanbal how he had spent the night.¹²⁶ The imam reported that he had had a dream vision of Judgement Day. Called before the divine tribunal, he was asked why he had been beaten. “For the Qurʾān,” he replied. God then asked him how he knew that the Qurʾān was divine speech. Ibn Ḥanbal cited an authority, ‘Abd al-Razzāq. Immediately God summoned ‘Abd al-Razzāq, who in turn cited Maʿmar. Maʿmar then appeared, and cited al-Zuhrī. God continued to call each transmitter in turn, summoning ‘Urwa, ‘Ā’isha, the Prophet, the angels Gabriel and Isrāfīl, the Preserved Tablet, and finally the Pen, who cited God. God declared all of them to be telling the truth: “The Qurʾān is my speech, uncreated!” By coincidence, the caliph had had a dream in which he was given a transcript of this very episode. After hearing the imam’s tale, he exclaimed: “Ibn Ḥanbal is right, and al-Muʿtaṣim repents!” He then ordered the execution of Bishr and Ibn Abī Duʿād, but was dissuaded from carrying it out. Ibn Ḥanbal was returned to his house with full honors.

Even more than Ibn al-Faraj’s, Sulaymān’s account makes a concerted effort to advance Ḥanbalī polemic by including all three types of proof: evidentiary dreams, conversion of the opponent, and a sign from God. The report simplifies the point at issue into a memorable riddle using the Qurʾān itself as a prop. Next, it provides a dramatic narrative to make tangible the Ḥadīth-men’s claim to the legacy of the Prophet. Ibn Ḥanbal’s *isnād* comes alive in Heaven, where it becomes clear that “heirship to the prophets” ultimately means guardianship of the words of God Himself. Moreover, the report gives a clear and

¹²⁵ Al-Marīsī is not mentioned in the family biographies for the good reason that he died before Ibn Ḥanbal’s trial (on him see *ThG*, III: 175–88).

¹²⁶ Unlike Ibn al-Faraj, Sulaymān recognizes that the interrogation spanned three days (although he puts the interrogation on the wrong one). But this timing is convenient: it allows for Ibn Ḥanbal to hold his funeral for the Qurʾān on the first night in his cell and have his dream-vision on the second.

unequivocal (if supernatural) explanation for Ibn Ḥanbal's release. It also forgives the caliph, who renounces the dogma of the created Qur'ān and repents of his persecution of Ibn Ḥanbal. Finally, it implicitly rehabilitates the *miḥna* itself: without it, the correctness of the Ḥanbalī opinion might never have come to light. Using jokes, riddles, and deft characterizations, the report makes these points so vigorously that it becomes completely unbelievable as history. No subsequent authority adduces it, and their rejection helps define the limits beyond which biographers – in their capacity as historians – would not go.¹²⁷

For later Ḥanbalī biographers, reports like those of Ibn al-Faraj and Sulaymān could not entirely displace the family accounts, which emanated from sources closer to the imam, and contained no blatant fabrications. The biographers accordingly used one of the family biographies, usually Ṣāliḥ's, as the armature of their accounts. However, they also pulled from other first-person reports, primarily that of Ibn al-Faraj, whatever bits and pieces contributed to a more dramatically and polemically satisfying narration, and inserted them at the appropriate points in the story. In his *Manāqib*, for example, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) interpolates into Ṣāliḥ's account reports confirming that Ibn Abī Du'ād, not al-Mu'taṣim, bore responsibility for the Inquisition. To account for the release, Ibn al-Jawzī has Ibn Abī Du'ād argue that letting the imam die inside the palace would make a martyr of him. Ibn al-Jawzī adds two reports claiming that the caliph relented because he feared the mob. Next comes the tale of the trousers in several versions, along with a report to explain away a contradiction that arises when the parallel versions are cited: why do the narrators see the trousers being restored while the inquisitors do not? The answer (ascribed to none other than the prefect Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm) is that the miracle "was not noticed due to the consternation (*dhuḥūl*) of those present." Finally, Ibn al-Jawzī cites testimony by two of the lictors, who report that they beat Ibn Ḥanbal nearly to death. This testimony evidently served to refute the claim that the imam was never badly hurt.¹²⁸

For all its achievements, Ibn al-Jawzī's account stops short of integrating all the reports into a single explanation. To achieve this, the Ḥanbalī tradition had only to undertake an incremental adjustment of elements already present. This process had begun before Ibn al-Jawzī's time: in the biography of Ibn Ḥanbal by al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1065–66) as cited by al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), we find a report that links the miracle with the alleged popular outcry. When Ibn Ḥanbal's sash slipped, the narrator saw "a golden hand emerge from under the sash by the power of God. At that, the common people raised an outcry." Neither al-Dhahabī nor al-Bayhaqī's epitomist Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) gives this report in full.¹²⁹ However, it does appear, perhaps on the authority of al-Bayhaqī, in a work roughly contemporary with Ibn al-Jawzī's:

¹²⁷ An element of the story does appear in Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, II: 60, where the quip about the death of the Qur'ān is attributed to the singer 'Ubāda. ¹²⁸ *Manīḥ*, 319ff.; citation at 337.

¹²⁹ *SAN*, 11:256; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, X: 335 (no common people).

the *Miḥnat al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal* of ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Maqdisī (d. 600/1203–4). There the report is narrated by ‘Abbas b. Miskawayh (or Mashkawayh) al-Hamadhanī:

We saw Aḥmad raise his face to the sky and move his lips. He had hardly finished his prayer when we saw a golden hand emerge from under his sash and restore it to its place by the power of Almighty God. At that the common people raised an outcry (*fa-dajjat al-‘amma*) and prepared to storm the palace, and [the caliph] ordered him released.¹³⁰

This account combines the crowd-report and the trouser-tale in a causal sequence: the people rioted when they saw the miracle, and the frightened caliph released the imam. Concise and plausible (if one believes in miracles), this explanation has only one disadvantage: it contradicts the testimony ascribed to Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm, according to which the spectators were too dismayed to notice the miracle. The contradiction is finally resolved in the *Manāqib* of Aḥmad al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1441–42), which removes the offending sentence from Ishāq’s report.¹³¹ After six centuries of compiling and sifting through a mass of reportage and other documentation, and as many centuries of editorial efforts to construct an account that would vindicate Ibn Ḥanbal while upholding – if only in appearance – the evidentiary protocol typical of Ḥadīth-minded biography, the Ḥanbalī literary tradition has now perfected its narrative response to the imam’s trial, flogging, and release.

Compared to the Twelver consensus on the death of ‘Alī al-Riḍā (ch. 3), the Ḥanbalī *miḥna*-account displays remarkable restraint in dealing with the caliphs. As we have seen, the Mamluk-period biographers disapproved of the Inquisition, and berated al-Ma’mūn roundly for imposing it (see ch. 2). Even so, they were unwilling to let the episode compromise the legitimacy of the caliphate. Heirs of a biographical tradition that had affirmed Ibn Ḥanbal’s fortitude, they could afford to set his ordeal in a broader context. The most extensive attempt to do so is that of al-Subkī (d. 771/1370), who in his entry on Ibn Ḥanbal makes a point of praising all the *miḥna*-caliphs. Al-Ma’mūn, despite his errant ways, was a philosopher-king, al-Mu‘taṣim a warrior for the faith, and al-Wāthiq a cultured wit. The Inquisition was the fault of “bad scholars” (*‘ulamā’ al-sū’*). But even they were not malicious, merely mistaken: “Had the jurists in [al-Mu‘taṣim’s] entourage been aware of the truth, they would have guided him to it. They would never have deluded him into flogging the likes of [Ibn Ḥanbal].” Al-Subkī concludes that this deviation from the otherwise admirable policies of the Abbasid caliphate had a purpose, namely, “to make evident God’s wise disposition concerning his creation.” By this he means that the *miḥna* allowed Ibn Ḥanbal to demonstrate the uncreateness of the Qur’ān.¹³²

Al-Ma’mūn would doubtless have been appalled had he known that his Inquisition would produce such a result. However, the same is not necessarily

¹³⁰ Maqdisī, *Miḥna*, 109.

¹³¹ Maqrīzī, *Manāqib*, cited in Patton, *Aḥmed*, 110.

¹³² Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, II: 57–59.

true of al-Muʿtaṣim. As Zaman has pointed out, al-Muʿtaṣim, unlike his predecessor, did not allege his interpretive authority against that of the scholars. Rather, he was merely uncertain about which set of scholars to believe.¹³³ It is probably too much to say that he ordered the flogging to find out whether the Qurʾān was created. Yet torture is not only, or even primarily, a means of punishment: it is also a way to extract the truth.¹³⁴ For contemporary observers, certainly, the *miḥna* had the effect of validating Ibn Ḥanbal's position. Pronounced under torture, his insistence on the uncreatedness of the Qurʾān assumed greater authority than it would have in any other context. In Ibn Ḥanbal's day, indignant proto-Sunnis like Abū ʿImrān could excoriate the Abbasids.¹³⁵ Centuries later, however, the Abbasids were no longer in a position to flog anyone, and al-Subkī could look back and see how helpful the Inquisition had been to the eventual triumph of Sunnism.

The cult of sanctity

The Ḥanbalī responses to the Inquisition indicate that transmitters and biographers had regarded the imam as a confessor of the faith. His contemporary, the ascetic Bishr b. al-Ḥārith, reportedly described him as “standing where the prophets stand.”¹³⁶ Typical of the attitude of later biographers is the assessment of Ibn al-Farrāʾ:

Ibn Hanbal was persecuted for the sake of God Almighty, the Book, and the *sunna* of the Prophet, but persevered and emerged victorious. God granted him eloquence during [his trial], clarified his speech, and let his side prevail. [Ibn Ḥanbal] was threatened, but did not fear. He was warned, but did not quail. He spoke forthrightly, and revealed the truth. He shone in his words, and provided a meet example. He triumphed over scholars, and crushed the mighty. How he stands out among the truthful, and how close he is to the ancients!¹³⁷

“If Ibn Ḥanbal had been one of the Children of Israel,” says Abū Nuʿaym al-Isfahānī, “he would have been an *āya*,” a sign or proof of God's power. Even al-ʿAbbādī (d. 458/1066), a Shāfiʿī biographer who took a dim view of Ibn Ḥanbal's *fiqh*, acknowledges that his career would make an *uḥdūtha*, a “story” or “legend.” Similarly, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, who was accused of bearing a grudge against the Ḥanbalīs, cites a report to the effect that “God has strengthened the faith with two men without peer: Abū Bakr on the day of the apostasy, and Ibn Ḥanbal on the day of the *miḥna*.”¹³⁸

Strikingly, appreciation of the imam's achievement was not confined to the scholars. If his later biographies are any guide, people of all sorts came to

¹³³ Zaman, *Religion*, 113.

¹³⁴ For parallels in another Abbasid trial, that of Ḥunayn b. Ishāq, see Cooperson, “Purported Autobiography.”

¹³⁵ Cf. the fulminations of Nuʿaym b. Ḥammad, cited in Jadʿān, *Miḥna*, 227–30.

¹³⁶ *ManIH*, 117–18. See further ch. 5. ¹³⁷ *TH*, I: 12–13.

¹³⁸ *HA*, IX: 166; ʿAbbādī, *Ṭabaqāt*, I: 250; *TB*, V: 183–84 (no. 2632); see also *TH*, I: 17; *ManIH*, 135–36.

regard him as a *baraka*-wielding holy man.¹³⁹ Our most important source of information on this “cult of sanctity” is Ibn al-Jawzī, who documents and discusses the imam’s reputation in several works. Although his sources depict Ibn Ḥanbal as having been revered, or at least worthy of reverence, his whole life long, Ibn al-Jawzī does cite a few reports that corroborate Abū Zur‘a’s impression that it was the *miḥna* that made his reputation. For many observers, his ordeal seems to have evoked many of the same associations as the zealot-stories that crop up in the biographies of al-Ma’mūn. Among these observers we must count al-Dhahabī, who in his biography of the imam cites the Ḥadīth of al-Khudrī (“the best *jihād* is to speak the truth before a tyrant”), precisely the text al-Ma’mūn accused the shroud-wearing zealot of trying to apply.¹⁴⁰ Ibn al-Jawzī, who is much less critical of the caliphs than al-Dhahabī, does not dwell on the imam’s defiance of the Abbasids. However, he does provide evidence to suggest that Ibn Ḥanbal’s fortitude under the lash captured the imagination of the common people. Although he professes disdain for the *‘amma*, Ibn al-Jawzī himself appears to have succumbed to the same temptation as they, namely, to admire Ibn Ḥanbal for performing a religious act that was at the same time a foolhardy display of defiance.

According to Ibn al-Jawzī, the imam himself related the following tale. When he was stretched out on the whipping-posts, someone tugged at his garment from behind and announced: “I am Abū al-Haytham, the thug, thief, and hoodlum. The caliph’s register says that I have been struck 18,000 lashes at one time or another, all in obedience to Satan for the sake of the world. So be strong in obedience to the Almighty for the sake of the faith.” According to this apocryphon, Ibn Ḥanbal later blessed Abū al-Haytham for strengthening his resolve.¹⁴¹ Ibn al-Jawzī includes this story in all three biographies he wrote of the imam, as if it were among the indispensable reports in any account of Ibn Ḥanbal.¹⁴² In one of the three biographies, Ibn al-Jawzī adds a series of anecdotes about the proverbial fortitude of the hoodlum Abū al-Haytham. These anecdotes display striking parallels, sometimes inverted, to the accounts of Ibn Ḥanbal’s Inquisition. In one, Abū al-Haytham (here called by his proper name of Khālīd al-Ḥaddād) explains to al-Mutawakkil and the vizier al-Faṭḥ b. Khākān just how tough he is:

He said, “Fill me a bag of scorpions, and I’ll put my hand in and feel as much pain as you would. The last lash hurts me as much as the first. And if you put a rag in my mouth

¹³⁹ Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, defined *baraka* as “growth and increase” or “an abundance of anything good.” Westermarck spoke of it as “a mysterious wonder-working force which is looked upon as a blessing from God” (*Ritual and Belief*, I:35). Geertz (writing, like Westermarck, about contemporary Morocco) describes *baraka* as the consequence of a tacit proposition that “the sacred appears most directly in the world as an endowment – a talent and a capacity, a special ability – of particular individuals,” whose best analogue is “personal presence, force of character, moral vividness . . . it is a gift which some men have in greater degree than others, and which a few, marabouts, have in superlative degree” (*Islam Observed*, 44).

¹⁴⁰ *SAḤ*, XI: 233. ¹⁴¹ *ManIH*, 333–34. ¹⁴² Also *Ṣifa*, II: 198; *Muntazam*, XI: 42–43.

as I was being flogged, it would catch fire and burn from all the heat coming out of my innards. However, I have trained myself to bear [such torments] with fortitude.”

Al-Faṭḥ said: “Shame on you! You are intelligent and eloquent! What drives you to practice such nonsense?”

He said, “I love power (*al-riʿāsa*).”

In another report, Khālīd is described “sitting unsteadily because the flesh of his buttocks had been torn away by flogging.” His associates, a group of *fityān* or “gangsters,” are discussing the feats of famous criminals. Khālīd then rebukes them: “Why are you talking about other people? Go do something yourselves, and let other people talk about *you!*”¹⁴³ *Mutatis mutandis*, Ibn Ḥanbal – who is also described as seeking *riʿāsa* – made essentially the same reply to those of his associates who submitted to the Inquisition.¹⁴⁴ More broadly, Khālīd’s boasting and Ibn Ḥanbal’s stubbornness challenge the caliph’s authority in the same way: no amount of beating will change the attitude of either. In both cases, the caliph can either acknowledge the authority his challenger represents, or kill him. However, the latter act would betray his inability to respond on any level except that of brute force. Of the two “zealots,” Khālīd offers the lesser challenge: as al-Faṭḥ b. Khākān insists, his position is *bāṭil* (nonsensical and wrong). For just this reason, however, he can utter what Ibn Ḥanbal cannot, namely, that his challenge to the caliph enhances his power (*riʿāsa*) over his followers. Because Ibn Ḥanbal’s positions, by contrast, have a claim to general recognition and are therefore truly dangerous, he must insist that he does not seek *riʿāsa*. Ṣāliḥ thus quotes him as saying after the flogging: “By God, I have given all I could in this effort; and I hope to come out of it even, without winning or losing.”¹⁴⁵

Ibn al-Jawzī presents his tales of hooligans and holy men without comment in the biographies. Surprisingly, however, he inveighs against similar stories in another work, the *Naqd al-ʿilm (Talbīs Iblīs)*. There he criticizes the gullibility, ignorance, and spiritual laziness that drive the uneducated to venerate ascetics, fortune-tellers, and charlatans. Among the charlatans are the *ʿayyārūn* and *fityān*, the self-proclaimed robber-heroes, whose thievery belies their claims to virtue. Again he cites the tales about Abū al-Haytham Khālīd al-Ḥaddād, but this time he condemns them. Those who take pride in their ability to suffer beatings, he says, should turn their talents to pious exercises instead.¹⁴⁶ From this chain of associations it would appear that the common people revered Ibn Ḥanbal for the same reason they admired the *fityān*, namely, fortitude under the lash. This conflation of the imam and the *fityān* reinforces our sense that asceticism, zealotry, and anti-Abbasid sentiment were linked in the popular imagination. More particularly, it indicates that the next step along the continuum was heroic banditry and criminal violence. Such an association evidently did no dishonor to Ibn Ḥanbal: if the state is unjust, virtue becomes a

¹⁴³ *Muntazam*, XI: 42–43. ¹⁴⁴ E.g. Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 76–79.

¹⁴⁵ Ṣāliḥ, *Sīra*, 66. The imam is quoting ʿUmar’s deathbed remark about his caliphate (Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, VI: 110). ¹⁴⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Naqd*, 415–30.

crime, and good men become criminals. The admirers of the *fiṭyān* evidently assumed that the converse was true as well. Deplore this sloppy thinking as he might, even Ibn al-Jawzī appears to acknowledge, consciously or otherwise, that being beaten by the caliph is a religious act. Otherwise, the *fiṭyān* would have no place in a chapter on religious deceit and demagoguery.

Suggestive as it may be, Ibn Ḥanbal's legendary kinship with the *fiṭyān* plays only a marginal role in his cult of sanctity. Far more commonly, he is described in terms befitting a *walī Allāh* or "ally of God."¹⁴⁷ In Ibn al-Jawzī's *Manāqib*, for example, his prayers are answered, his person and his relics are sought out for the blessing they confer, and his tomb is a shrine. His contemporaries are awestruck by his asceticism, hopeful of his intercession, and terrified of his disapproval. They are persuaded of his nearly messianic role in the triumph of the faith, and his consequent ability to confer personal salvation. Such attributions reportedly provoked protests on Ibn Ḥanbal's part, but appear to have been accepted uncritically by most of his biographers. Admittedly, Ibn al-Jawzī was to protest when Abū Nu'aym labeled the imam a Sufi, and al-Dhahabī was to decry the miracle-tales that had attached themselves to his biography. But even these protests were relatively muted. Evidently, the stories of Ibn Ḥanbal's extraordinary closeness to God could not be easily dismissed. If nothing else, they permitted his biographers to come to terms with two of the *ṭā'ifa*'s most important rivals, the Sufis and the Shāfi'īs. To understand how these relationships were negotiated, it will be necessary to look more closely at the cult of sanctity that arose around the imam.

Even before the *miḥna*, Ibn Ḥanbal evidently enjoyed a reputation for profound knowledge of the *sunna*. More important, however, than his knowledge was his conspicuous application of it. "I have never written down a Ḥadīth of the Prophet," he said, "without putting it into practice."¹⁴⁸ He thus qualified himself to perform one of the functions of the holy man, namely, to serve as an exemplar for his followers.¹⁴⁹ In theory, of course, his task was to teach Ḥadīth, which his students were to use in their own efforts to emulate the Prophet. In practice, however, Ibn Ḥanbal's exemplary application of the *sunna* made him an object of emulation in his own right. To judge from the reports in the *Manāqib*, the imam's contemporaries observed his practice in even the most trivial matters. As biographer, Ibn al-Jawzī fosters the cult by committing everything, including the trivia, to writing.¹⁵⁰ In effect, he provides

¹⁴⁷ A *walī* is a helper or ally (*nāṣir*: Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*). A *walī Allāh* would thus be someone who aids God's cause on earth. It is often translated "saint," which is reasonable enough given the *walī*'s attributes and the loose application of "saint" in current English. However, this rendering often provokes the objection that Islam does not canonize persons. Baldick (*Mystical Islam*, 7–8), suggests "friend of God," but this is more exactly the translation of *khalīl Allāh*, the epithet of Abraham. *Walī*, moreover, was not (and is not) the ordinary word for friend in Arabic. As Baldick notes, the term has etymological overtones of patronage and clientage. "Ally," I think, conveys these overtones better than "friend."¹⁴⁸ *ManIH*, 179.

¹⁴⁹ Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar."

¹⁵⁰ Ibn al-Jawzī states that he has written the imam's biography for the instruction of "those who emulate him" (*ManIH*, 6).

the sort of information about Ibn Ḥanbal that Ibn Ḥanbal himself sought about the Prophet, including not only his opinions on matters of faith and practice but his habits of speech, eating, and dress. The *Manāqib* records, for example, his belief that faith can increase or decrease, that the doctrine of the created Qurʾān constitutes unbelief, and that the anthropomorphic verses are not to be interpreted allegorically. It also notes that he wore yellow shoes, depilated himself at home instead of at the bathhouse, and patched his clothes in colors that did not match.¹⁵¹

Of course, there was a danger inherent in such attentiveness: that Ibn Ḥanbal's practice "might then replace the principles of conduct traced by the Qurʾān and the *sunna*."¹⁵² Such an outcome, though blasphemous, was not literally unthinkable. In a later source, Abū Bakr al-Khallāl, a Ḥanbalī of the second generation, mentions an "ignoramus" who said of the imam's followers that "Ibn Ḥanbal is their prophet."¹⁵³ The imam himself was evidently aware of the danger. According to the *Manāqib*, he disapproved of anyone's writing down his legal opinions. When, for example, a Khurasani student showed him his notes, the imam tossed the document away in anger.¹⁵⁴ He also disapproved of those who sought to gain *baraka* by touching him. Yet self-deprecation is also part of the dynamic of both sainthood and *wilāya*. The holy man insists on his unworthiness, and his followers take his modesty as further proof of his high standing. This dynamic subtends many of Ibn al-Jawzī's reports, and indeed lends an almost novelistic sense of progression to the *Manāqib* as a whole. In one report, a neighbor recalls:

I went into the entryway and found [Ibn Ḥanbal] sitting on the dirt floor. The dye in his hair had run, and I could see the white roots of his hair. He was wearing a small and soiled *karāmīs* waist-wrapper and a coarse shirt with dirt on the shoulder and sweat-stains on the collar.

I asked him a question about scrupulosity and the acquisition of merit. No sooner had I asked the question than I saw his face fall and assume a sorrowful expression, as if he were disgusted with, and sorry for, himself, so much so that it pained me to watch him.

As we were leaving, I said to someone who was with me, "Some days he seems so dissatisfied with himself."¹⁵⁵

As a result of this incident, Ibn Ḥanbal's reputation presumably gained new luster, even though he never answered his neighbor's question – or if he did, the answer meant less to the storyteller than the imam's air of self-reproach.

As this report also suggests, Ibn Ḥanbal's poverty served as the external

¹⁵¹ *ManIH*, 6; 153, 154, 156; 256, 247, 256. ¹⁵² Laoust, "Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal," 274.

¹⁵³ *SAN*, XI: 305.

¹⁵⁴ *ManIH*, 276; see also 281–82. This attitude places the responsible biographer in a difficult position. Ibn al-Jawzī lamely argues that although Ibn Ḥanbal forbade anyone to commit his pronouncements to writing, "God decreed that they be recorded and organized and spread far and wide" (194).

¹⁵⁵ *Mā arāhu yantafiʿ bi-naḥsihi ayyāman*. Ibid., 209; cf. 275. On *zuhd* and *ḥuzn*, see Massignon, *Essai*, 169.

sign of spiritual authority. In the family reports, we find descriptions of his austerity and shabbiness. We are told, for example, that he would sit directly on the ground instead of using a mat or cushion, and forebore going to the bathhouse for fifty years. "My favorite days," he reportedly said, "are when I wake up with nothing in the house." Upon his death, he left behind "six or maybe seven *qi'as* in a rag worth two *dāniqs* that he had used to wipe his face."¹⁵⁶ Renunciation (*zuhd*), as we have seen, could come about as a consequence of scrupulosity (*wara'*) as well as imitation of the Prophet. One manifestation of it, the imam's unwillingness to accept gifts, allowed him to play the patron, at least on occasion. Most often, he would return gifts.¹⁵⁷ When he could not, he gave them away. When, for example, al-Mutawakkil sent him a sack of money, he redistributed it to impoverished scholars, in sums ranging from 50 to 200 dirhams. Even the sack he insisted on giving away to a beggar.¹⁵⁸

In the *Manāqib*, shabbiness takes on an additional meaning: it is associated with membership in a secret fraternity of holy men. There are some intimations of this in the family accounts, as when Ṣālih recalls that his father was moved by the sight of ragged men, and urged him to emulate them. In the *Manāqib*, we learn that Baghdadis believed that certain ragged men were among the *abdāl* or *budalā'*, that is, one of a limited number of holy men gifted with special powers of intercession.¹⁵⁹ Ibn Ḥanbal is depicted as familiar with the notion, which he interprets in accordance with his ideas of virtue. Asked where the *budalā'* might be found, he replies: "If not among the Ḥadīth-scholars, then I don't know where." In another account, he says, "If the Ḥadīth-scholars are not the *abdāl*, then I don't know who would be."¹⁶⁰ In the popular imagination, however, the notion appears only vaguely related to *ilm*. One Abū 'Abd Allāh b. Sāfirī reports:

When we were young, we used to worship in the Perfumer's Mosque. Some of us worked weaving palm-fiber, others worked as spinners, and so on. One of us, a young man of prepossessing appearance, told us the following story.

"We were fishing on the shore of the Dujayl. Darkness fell, and suddenly we saw a man in rags and tatters, walking along so fast I couldn't catch him. I accosted him and said, "Hey you! Are you one of the *abdāl*?"

"Yes," he replied . . .

"Where are you coming from?" I asked.

"From Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal's."

"What were you doing there?"

"Asking him a question about a disputed matter. Aḥmad is one of us; in fact, he's better than we are."¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ *ManIH*, 276, 244–45; 419.

¹⁵⁷ Ṣālih, *Sīra*, 43–44.

¹⁵⁸ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 99–101.

¹⁵⁹ See Goldziher, "Abdāl"; Massignon, *Essai*, 112–14; and Chabbi, "Abdāl" (esp. 1: 1: 174, on the Ḥanbalī notion of *abdāl*) from which I derive the tentative definition given above. Cf. also Melchert, "Transition," 58, note 38, who describes the *abdāl* as "the most saintly traditionalists." ¹⁶⁰ *ManIH*, 181. ¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

Admittedly, Ibn Ḥanbal's high standing arises from the characteristic scholarly function of answering questions about "disputed matters."¹⁶² But the *abdāl*, or more exactly the *badal* that appears in this story, is a ragged wanderer, not a known scholar. The obviously contrived nature of the report suggests that Ḥanbalī transmitters were endeavoring to reclaim the notion of *abdāl* from the ascetics. If any ragged renunciant could attain a reputation for extraordinary closeness to God, the painstaking efforts of the Ḥadīth-scholars might seem pointless. Indeed, certain ascetics of Ibn Ḥanbal's day decried Ḥadīth, while others had gone so far as to outline an alternative epistemology, mysticism (see ch. 5). These developments evidently required a response from Ḥanbalī transmitters. One response appears to be their emphasis on the imam's poverty and austerity, as if to say that he could beat the ascetics at their own game.¹⁶³ Another response, evidently, was to suggest that the *abdāl* deem Ibn Ḥanbal worthier even than themselves.

Besides giving Ibn Ḥanbal a position among the *abdāl*, the *Manāqib* grants him *istijābat al-da'wa*, the power to have his prayers answered. In later Sufi biography, efficacious prayer was a sign of *wilāya* ("affiliation with God"). Abu Nu'aym, for example, numbers *istijābat al-da'wa* among the powers of the *awliyā'*.¹⁶⁴ According to the Shiite Imam 'Alī al-Riḍā, it was one of the defining properties of the imamate, the other being knowledge.¹⁶⁵ In Peter Brown's early model of late-antique sainthood, the efficacy of prayer is indispensable to the holy man's authority as patron and as intercessor. This authority is most dramatically demonstrated by the summoning of miracles, which prove particularly effective in securing allegiance and inspiring conversions.¹⁶⁶ More recently, Claudia Rapp has shed new light on the holy man's role as intercessor. The saint's associates ask him to pray that they be guided in their spiritual striving, that they be spared temptation, and that their sins be forgiven. The desired result of the saint's intercession, therefore, need not always be a miracle, nor need his patronage extend beyond the circle of his associates. By praying for the spiritual welfare of his followers, the saint secures their allegiance, receives their prayers in return, and contributes to the solidarity of the community of faith.¹⁶⁷ In the *Manāqib*, Ibn Ḥanbal's prayers serve a similar variety of functions. In one case, his invocation produced a spectacular evidentiary miracle: the raising of his trousers during the Inquisition. In another, he protected himself, and by extension the *ahl al-sunna*, by praying never to see al-Ma'mūn, who indeed died soon afterward.¹⁶⁸ Under more mundane circumstances, he solved problems for himself and his neighbors: banishing ants from his house, stopping his grandson's nosebleed, and curing his neighbor's crippled mother.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶² The relative status of the two men is also evident from the fact that the ragged man went to visit Ibn Ḥanbal, not the other way around; see further below, pp. 182–84.

¹⁶³ Cf. Laoust, "Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal," 274. ¹⁶⁴ *HA*, I: 5–17.

¹⁶⁵ *UAR*, II: 200. ¹⁶⁶ Brown, "Rise and Function" and *Authority*, esp. 57–78.

¹⁶⁷ Rapp, "For Next to God." ¹⁶⁸ Ḥanbal, *Dhikr*, 41. ¹⁶⁹ *Manāqib*, 295–98.

As in the case of Christian saints, the power of Ibn Ḥanbal's intercession was perceived to extend to his person and his effects. His contemporaries reportedly attributed miraculous effects to his touch, his gaze, his relics, the mention of his name, or simple proximity to his house. They gathered to see not only him, but anyone who had seen him or even prayed in his mosque.¹⁷⁰ On the frontier, warriors claimed that one look from him conferred as much blessing as a year of pious living, and the catapult crews credited their hits to their invocation of him.¹⁷¹ His possessions, moreover, were invulnerable to flood or fire, and could transmit his *baraka*. When a student's pen broke, Ibn Ḥanbal gave him one of his own; the student gave it in turn to a man who placed it in his date-palm hoping that the tree would bear fruit, which it did.¹⁷² The imam himself accepted transitive *baraka* in principle: he reportedly kept the Prophet's bowl and some of his hairs.¹⁷³ Characteristically, however, he was dismayed at being treated with similar reverence. When, for example, al-Ṭayālīsī touched him and then rubbed himself, the imam "waved his hand as if shaking something off it, saying 'Where did you learn that?' in tones of the most vigorous disapprobation."¹⁷⁴

Besides conferring blessings in this world, Ibn Ḥanbal also served as an index of one's fate in the next. The *Manāqib* reports that "one's opinion of Ibn Ḥanbal works as a test to distinguish the Muslim from the heretic." A believer need not examine the arguments of the Rāfiḍīs, Nāṣibīs, Qadarīs, and Murji'īs: since they all hate Ibn Ḥanbal, they must be innovators.¹⁷⁵ Such declarations were not simply a matter of polemic, or a coded language for branding theological opponents. Rather, they amounted to curses, with excruciating consequences. One man reports that his tongue swelled up painfully after he criticized the imam. More gruesome fates befell other offenders in rough proportion to the severity of the offense. A man who fired a shot at the imam's tomb had his hand wither. Ibn Abī Du'ād, the chief judge under al-Mu'taṣim, was smitten by a palsy. Similarly, one of the men who flogged the imam during the Inquisition suffered an affliction that made him bark like a dog.¹⁷⁶ Unless the offender begged forgiveness, as many reportedly did, his punishment would presumably continue in Hell. The most spectacular example of this principle is the fate attributed to the chief inquisitor. On the night he died, "fires were seen in Baghdad and elsewhere, as if Hell had opened its mouth and spewed out flame . . . in preparation for the coming of Ibn Abī Du'ād."¹⁷⁷

Conversely, allegiance to Ibn Ḥanbal held out the promise of salvation. One narrator reports a vision of the Day of Judgement in which he saw Ibn Ḥanbal dispensing the signet-rings that allow the dead to cross the bridge to Paradise. Another reports that Ibn Ḥanbal, seconded by three archangels, stands guard at the gate of Heaven.¹⁷⁸ In such visions, scholars are projecting into the afterlife Ibn Ḥanbal's earthly privilege of distinguishing between belief and

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 150. ¹⁷¹ Ibid., 149–50. ¹⁷² Ibid., 295–98. ¹⁷³ Ibid., 187.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 276. ¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 493–95. ¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 491–94. ¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 491.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 446–47 (cf. Kinberg, "Legitimation," 65).

unbelief. Popular devotion swept such distinctions aside, claiming rather that mere proximity to the imam's tomb was enough to guarantee salvation. One visitor to the cemetery overheard a voice announce from the ground: "None of us are damned, thank God, because of Aḥmad's *baraka*." Various witnesses report dream-visits in which recently deceased friends and relatives thank the living for burying them near the imam. In one report, his *baraka* extends over the entire city of Baghdad: his tomb is one of the four for whose sake God forbears to punish the city for its sins.¹⁷⁹

Significantly, Ibn al-Jawzī treats all the manifestations of the cult on an equal footing. The scholars' appreciation of Ibn Ḥanbal's ordeal, his neighbors' requests for intercession, and the hopeful visits to the tomb appear as equally legitimate acknowledgements of his service to the faith. Almost no claim was too extravagant for an exemplar of such conspicuous attainments. Only one assertion, it seems, met with reservation on the part of the Ḥanbalīs: the claim that the imam had been a Sufi. The culprit here was Abū Nu'aym al-Isfahānī (d. 430/1038), whose *Hilyat al-awliyā'* numbers all the "allies of God," even those of the Prophet's generation, among the Sufis. The entry on Ibn Ḥanbal does not neglect his scholarly attainments. Indeed, it contains a lengthy section listing unusual Ḥadīth known on his authority, cites numerous reports of his learning and his *fiqh*, and praises him as a bastion against heresy.¹⁸⁰ But Abū Nu'aym also describes him as one who "taught the renunciants" and "cultivated anxiety and preoccupation," adding that "Sufism is polishing oneself with stains, and embellishing oneself with pains."¹⁸¹ Introducing a series of reports on Ibn Hanbal's asceticism, he interjects: "It has been said that Sufism is renunciation adorning a pious and scholarly man, like jewelry upon a young and shapely girl."¹⁸² For Abū Nu'aym, evidently, Sufism and Ḥadīth-scholarship were perfectly compatible.

Abū Nu'aym's assimilation of Ibn Ḥanbal met with the tacit approval of some Ḥadīth-scholars. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, for example, reproduced many of the *Hilya*-reports in his own biography of the imam.¹⁸³ Ibn al-Jawzī, however, found Abū Nu'aym's appropriation of Ibn Ḥanbal irritating. In the introduction to the *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa*, he criticizes his predecessor's work on literary as well as doctrinal grounds. The purpose of writing about the *awliyā'*, he declares, is to document "their states of being and their moral character, so that the seeker may emulate them."¹⁸⁴ From this premise follow several rules for biographical writing, all of which Abū Nu'aym failed to heed. For one thing, an entry on a particular person should talk about him rather than cite stories about other people which he happened to transmit. Moreover, if a biographer must include dubious stories, he should at least warn the reader.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 483–84. One visit is dated to 460/1067–68, meaning that the tomb-cult was active well before Ibn al-Jawzī's day (481–82). ¹⁸⁰ *HA*, IX: 164–68.

¹⁸¹ *Al-tajallī bi 'l-āthār, wa 'l-taḥallī bi 'l-akdār*, ibid., IX: 161. I thank Wolfhart Heinrichs for this elegant translation. ¹⁸² Ibid., IX: 174.

¹⁸³ *TB*, V: 180, 182, 183, 185, 187 (no. 2632). ¹⁸⁴ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa*, I: 2ff.

This is a particularly culpable offense, says Ibn al-Jawzī, since piety-minded people are less apt to criticize such tales. Indeed, stories in which *awliyā'* perform bizarre feats might prompt readers to imitate them and harm themselves.¹⁸⁵ Finally, Abū Nu'aym failed to understand what Sufism really means. "The trite rhymed prose" of the *Ḥilya* "hardly contains a single correct meaning, particularly regarding the definitions of Sufism." Sufism, Ibn al-Jawzī explains, is a "path" (*madhhab*) understood by its adherents to mean more than renunciation. The Prophet and a number of believers in every age were ascetics, and some of the latter may also be Sufis. But the notion that every conspicuously pious Muslim is Sufi is a gratuitous misrepresentation.¹⁸⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī thus objects to the "attribution of Sufism to prominent figures," including Ibn Ḥanbal, "who had no idea of any such thing."¹⁸⁷

Ibn al-Jawzī's comments in the *Ṣifa* and elsewhere reveal the existence of a tension between scholars and ascetics, with the people preferring the latter. In his *Ṣayd al-khāṭir*, he remarks: "We have seen and heard the common people praise a man, saying: 'He does not sleep at night, nor break his fast, nor know a wife, nor taste any worldly pleasure! His body has wasted away, and his bones are so weak that he prays sitting down! He is better than the scholars who eat and enjoy their pleasures.'" However, learning and knowledge confer more benefit to others than any feats of self-denial. "One *faqīh*, even if his followers are few and his successors nonexistent, is better than a thousand men of the sort the commoners rub their hands upon for a blessing, and to whose funerals countless numbers flock."¹⁸⁸ These passages, and comparable ones in his other works, make Ibn al-Jawzī appear a defender of ascetism as against Sufism, or a defender of the scholarly model as against them both. However, he seems rather to be defending Sufism against irresponsible accretions, just as he defends biography from the indiscriminate acceptance of irrelevant or misleading material. As Makdisi has recently discovered, Ibn al-Jawzī appears to have been affiliated with the Sufis himself. For this very reason, perhaps, he was especially sensitive to facile characterizations of Sufi piety.¹⁸⁹

As a Ḥadīth-scholar who was also an ascetic, Ibn Ḥanbal served his successors well. Moderate Sufi apologists like Abū Nu'aym could cite him as evidence against the more extreme claims of anti-Ḥadīth Sufism. Ḥanbalī biographers, on the other hand, could cite him as proof that a scholar could outdo the renunciants in *zuhd*. The only difficulty was that the imam's reputation as a *walī* could inspire adoration for the wrong reasons. Ibn al-Jawzī is aware of the problem, although he is much less judgemental in the *Manāqib* than his pronouncements elsewhere would imply. In any event, scholarly fulminations against popular piety evidently had little effect on practice. Perhaps because of their asceticism, Ḥanbalī jurists appear to have been particularly prone to adulation. A particularly striking case is that of Taqī al-Dīn Taymiya

¹⁸⁵ For an example, see Ibn al-Jawzī, *Naqd*, 412. ¹⁸⁶ Cf. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣayd*, 25–27.

¹⁸⁷ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa*, 1: 4. ¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 1:34; cf. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Naqd*, 415–30.

¹⁸⁹ Makdisi, "Hanbali School," esp. 124–26.

(d. 728/1328), the Mamlūk-period jurist. Like his hero Ibn Ḥanbal, he was accused of professing anthropomorphism, and like him was examined by hostile jurists and cast into prison. Ironically for one who had condemned the veneration of holy men, he attracted an enormous popular following in Cairo and Damascus. When he died in the Damascus citadel, imprisoned for his legal judgements against visiting tombs, some of the mourners reportedly drank the water that had been used to wash his corpse.¹⁹⁰ Like Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn Taymiya appears to have been affiliated with the Sufis himself. Again, this affiliation may explain the urgency with which he condemned irregular or exaggerated manifestations of Sufi piety.¹⁹¹

Perhaps not coincidentally, it is in the writings of Ibn Taymiya's contemporary al-Dhahabī that we find the most rigorous criticism of the Ḥanbalī biographical tradition. Al-Dhahabī was accused by his contemporary al-Subkī of disparaging the *fuqarāʾ* ("the poor," here meaning the Sufis) while favoring the "anthropomorphists," that is, the Ḥanbalīs.¹⁹² However, his lengthy biography of Ibn Ḥanbal assumes a skeptical posture toward even the most widely accepted constituents of Ibn Ḥanbal's legend. In his account of the flogging, for example, al-Dhahabī describes the trouser-tale as "a reprehensible story" (*ḥikāya munkara*). He suggests that one of the transmitters concocted it, and castigates al-Bayhaqī for citing it "without daring to point out its undependability." Similarly, he condemns Abū Nuʿaym for including the "incorrect" account of Ibn al-Faraj, not to mention certain "abominable fantasticalities" (*al-khurāfāt al-samīja*) he is ashamed to repeat.¹⁹³ For al-Dhahabī, the most important result of the Inquisition was not the vindication of Ibn Ḥanbal's *wilāya*. Rather, it was the refutation of Jahmism. To drive the point home, he adduces several *kalām*-arguments against the createdness-doctrine.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, he takes a dim view of Ibn Ḥanbal's cult of sanctity. Ibn al-Jawzī, he says, should have been ashamed to reproduce dubious tales of adulation for the imam.¹⁹⁵ Most often, al-Dhahabī critiques the suspicious reports by picking apart their *isnāds*. Occasionally, he will also declare their content to be unlikely. Commenting on the claim that 20,000 Jews, Christians, and Magians converted to Islam at Ibn Ḥanbal's funeral, he notes that the alleged eyewitness died a considerable time before the imam. He adds that "empirical and analytical considerations" (*al-ʿāda wa ʾl-aql*) indicate that it is impossible for thousands of people to convert without any notice being taken of the event by Ṣāliḥ, Ḥanbal, al-Marrūdhī, or other prominent transmitters of the imam's *akhbār*.¹⁹⁶ He thus appears to direct his criticism at the unlikelihood that such

¹⁹⁰ Laoust, *Essai*, 111–50. ¹⁹¹ Makdisi, "Hanbali School."

¹⁹² Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2: 22; Khalidī, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 203–04.

¹⁹³ *SAN*, XI: 255–56. To explain the imam's release, al-Dhahabī proposes (following a report ascribed to Abū Zurʿa) that al-Muʿtaṣim "feared that [Ibn Ḥanbal] would die as a result of the flogging and the common people would rise up against him" (XI: 260).

¹⁹⁴ *SAN*, XI: 290ff. ¹⁹⁵ *SAN*, XI: 209.

¹⁹⁶ *SAN*, XI: 343–44. For a philosophical discussion of these criteria, see Qazwīnī, *Talkhīṣ*, and Taftazānī, *Mukhtaṣar al-maʿānī* (in one volume), 27ff.

an event would go unreported, not at the unlikelihood of the event itself. One may wonder, nonetheless, whether the transmission-critique disguises a skepticism about the possibility of such occurrences in the first place.

Like Ibn al-Jawzī before him, however, al-Dhahabī cannot help being lenient in the case of Ibn Ḥanbal. Even when he declares particular claims to be false, he concedes that the fabricators acted in accordance with praiseworthy impulses. Thus, he says, “it is an improper exaggeration” to claim, as the frontier warriors did, that a single glance from Ibn Ḥanbal confers the benefits of a year of pious worship. However, the motive behind such a fabrication is “the love of God for His own sake.” Elsewhere he remarks that Ibn Ḥanbal was “not the sort of person who needs dream-visions to prove his *wilāya*.” Yet, he admits, such reports do “cheer a believer’s heart.” He will even acknowledge the forgers’ literary talents: an apocryphal tale about the end of the *miḥna* is false, he says, but still “a clever story” (*qiṣṣa malīḥa*).¹⁹⁷

As al-Dhahabī’s use of the term *wilāya* indicates, even a skeptical biographer could accept the notion that Ibn Ḥanbal was among the “allies of God.” For al-Dhahabī’s predecessors, however, it was evidently impossible to grant the imam such a status without attributing miraculous manifestations to him. As a result, Ḥanbalī biographers often found themselves playing a game of one-upmanship with Sufi-minded transmitters, who attributed similar manifestations to their own exemplars. In the story about the four tombs that protect Baghdad from the wrath of God, the other three protectors are named as Maṣṣūr b. ‘Ammār, Ma‘rūf al-Karkhī, and Bishr b. al-Ḥārith. All three were renowned ascetics with only minor attainments in Ḥadīth. Of the three, Bishr b. al-Ḥārith appears most frequently in reports comparing Ibn Ḥanbal to one of his ascetic contemporaries. For biographers in the Ḥanbalī and Sufi camps, the reports that compare the two men served as a basis upon which to judge competing claims of heirship to the Prophet. As a Ḥadīth-scholar who was also an ascetic, Ibn Ḥanbal – or more exactly, his reputation – was destined to play an important role in the resolution of this dispute (see further ch. 5).

Within the Ḥadīth-community itself, Ibn Ḥanbal’s legend served other important purposes. As we have seen, it afforded the Ḥadīth-community a position of strength from which it could forgive the Abbasid caliphate for the Inquisition. Moreover, it helped reinforce the specifically Ḥanbalī claim to authority as against that of the other schools of legal interpretation. Of the four Sunni schools, the Shāfi‘ī was closest to the Ḥanbalī in stressing Ḥadīth. The differences between them, at least at first, lay in their respective attitudes towards *fiqh*. Ibn Ḥanbal disavowed explicit jurisprudential reasoning, and reportedly declared al-Shāfi‘ī’s *Risāla* unworthy of being copied out.¹⁹⁸ For his part, al-Shāfi‘ī thought little of the Ḥadīth-men’s inept efforts at systematic thinking.¹⁹⁹ Although he reportedly expressed the highest admiration for Ibn

¹⁹⁷ *SAN*, XI: 211, 353, and 313.

¹⁹⁸ *TH*, I: 31 and 57.

¹⁹⁹ Schacht, *Origins*, 57, 254.

Ḥanbal personally,²⁰⁰ his followers were more circumspect. Thus, the entry on Ibn Ḥanbal by the Shāfiʿī biographer al-ʿAbbādī (d. 458/1066) contains two stories in which al-Shāfiʿī explains a point of *fiqh* to Ibn Ḥanbal.²⁰¹ The most celebrated breach between the two schools, at least as far as biography is concerned, occurred in connection with al-Khaṭīb's *Taʾrīkh Baghdād*. According to Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Khaṭīb had been a Ḥanbalī, but when his colleagues accused him of sympathy for “innovators,” he joined the Shāfiʿī school. “He then took up a cudgel against [the Ḥanbalīs] in his books, criticizing them indirectly, or even directly when he could.” In the *Taʾrīkh*, he called al-Shāfiʿī “the imam and the ornament of the jurists,” while Ibn Ḥanbal was merely “the imam of the Ḥadīth-scholars.” In one of the entries, he alluded to Ibn Ḥanbal's disputational ineptitude. “What are you doing with that tyro?” he cites one al-Karabīsī as saying, referring to Ibn Ḥanbal. “If you say the utterance of the Qurʾān is created, he cries heresy (*bidʿa*); but if you say it isn't, he also cries heresy!” In response to these slights against their imam, not only Ibn al-Jawzī but also al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) wrote refutations of al-Khaṭīb.²⁰² When more conciliatory biographers attempted to mend the breach, they did so by using stories, apparently apocryphal, of encounters between Ibn Ḥanbal and al-Shāfiʿī. Ibn ʿAsākir, himself a Shāfiʿī, relates one such tale in his *Taʾrīkh Dimashq*. The caliph al-Rashīd asked al-Shāfiʿī to nominate his best student for the judgeship of the Yemen. Al-Shāfiʿī nominated Ibn Ḥanbal, who refused, saying: “I came here only to acquire learning from you, but you are ordering me to become involved with them!” meaning the caliphs. Al-Shāfiʿī, says the narrator, was abashed.²⁰³ This story appears to have been constructed to build up Ibn Ḥanbal at the expense of his older contemporary. More commonly, however, biographers affiliated with the two *madhhabs* take pains to suggest that their respective exemplars recognized each other's greatness.

According to a report in the *Manāqib*, al-Shāfiʿī saw the Prophet in a dream and learned from him that Ibn Ḥanbal would be called upon to say that the Qurʾān is created, but should refuse to do so. Al-Shāfiʿī, who was living in Egypt, sent a letter to Baghdad to inform Ibn Ḥanbal of the news. When the messenger delivered the letter and demanded a reward, Ibn Ḥanbal gave the man his shirt. The messenger returned and showed the shirt to al-Shāfiʿī. “I won't take it away from you,” said the jurist, “but soak it and give me the water, so I can share the benefit of it with you.”²⁰⁴ This report recapitulates the project of Ḥanbalī biography, supernatural accretions and all. It establishes that Ibn Ḥanbal's opinion of the Qurʾān is the right one, and conveys this message in an *isnād* from al-Shāfiʿī back to the Prophet. Supernatural elements notwithstanding, the report also observes certain historical facts. Al-

²⁰⁰ See., e.g., *TH*, I: 5. ²⁰¹ ʿAbbādī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 3; also Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, II: 61.

²⁰² Yāqūt, *Muʿjam*, I: 503; *TB*, V: 178 (no. 2632) and II: 54 (no. 404); Malti-Douglas, “Controversy,” 121–22; Dickinson, “Aḥmad b. al-Ṣalt,” 413–14.

²⁰³ Ibn ʿAsākir, *Taʾrīkh kabīr*, I: 28–48. ²⁰⁴ *Manāqib*, 455–56.

Shāfiʿī indeed lived in Egypt, and Ibn Ḥanbal in Baghdad. Al-Shāfiʿī died before the Inquisition, so any awareness of it on his part must come through a dream. The two men were scholars of roughly equal standing, and the report refers to them as “brothers.” Both men are heirs of the Prophet, entrusted with defending the faith in their generation. In life, Ibn Ḥanbal had his doubts about Shāfiʿī *qiyās*, just as al-Shāfiʿī criticized the obtuseness of the *ahl al-ḥadīth*. In this report, however, they have a common interest in safeguarding the Qurʾān. Since it fell to Ibn Ḥanbal to defy the Inquisition, al-Shāfiʿī regards him as an ally of God, and seeks his *baraka* in the same way the neighbors, disciples, and pilgrims do. Although al-Dhahabī disapproved of stories like this one, it achieves a purpose of which even he would approve: it affirms the bond between two exemplars who, whatever their differences on the acceptability of *qiyās*, agree that Sunnism is the creed of the saved.

Conclusions

Before the Inquisition, Ibn Ḥanbal stood at the center of a group of followers intent on preserving every detail of the *sunna*. To do so, they cultivated a profound knowledge of Ḥadīth as well as an aversion to the outside world. Their avoidance of “the dubious” entailed an abhorrence for the state and its representatives, whose wealth they presumed to be tainted by misappropriation. The court, as we have seen, regarded the common people as a breeding ground for clamorous ignorance and pigheaded perversity. The nascent Ḥanbalī community, for its part, appears to have viewed the court as a hotbed of self-indulgence and doctrinal frivolity. As the Prophet’s heirs, however, the representatives of both groups professed to have the interests of their fellow believers at heart. Al-Maʾmūn claimed that the Inquisition would save the souls of the “anthropomorphists,” or, failing that, purge the community of their noxious influence. Ibn Ḥanbal, conversely, eschewed rebellion against the state, citing Ḥadīth to the effect that civil strife was worse than oppression. Caught between the two sides were *sunna*-minded court scholars like Yaḥyā b. Aktham. During the Inquisition, one such scholar (ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Ishāq) proved the most solicitous of Ibn Ḥanbal’s welfare. Yet the legacy of al-Maʾmūn, who had resigned himself to cultivating Jahmī theologians as a counterweight to the scholars, continued to divide the Prophet’s heirs until the lifting of the *miḥna*.

As the court theologians proved, Ibn Ḥanbal lacked the disputational prowess to refute the createdness-doctrine. He did, however, have the fortitude to insist, despite browbeating, imprisonment, and flogging, that any such doctrine should at least be defensible on the grounds of Qurʾān and *sunna*. Even so, the later, more elaborate refutations of Jahmism credited to him should more properly be ascribed to his associates and biographers. At his first interrogation, he asserted only that the Qurʾān is the speech of God and that God is as He has described Himself. Only after prolonged experience debating with

the theologians did he make the positive declaration that the Qur'ān is created. As the early Ḥanbalī texts also show, his students (including his biographers) were capable of adducing proof-texts and arguments to support the imam's position on everything from the permissibility of dolls to the illegality of rebellion. This process of retrospective assistance culminated in the *kalām*-arguments found in such texts as the *Radd 'alā al-jahmīya*.

Ḥanbal and Ṣāliḥ agree that the imam was released without capitulating, and evince little awareness that someone might think otherwise. But the hagiographic accounts, which invoke unruly crowds and evidentiary miracles to explain the release, betray the presence of a counternarrative. This counternarrative, preserved in three reports (two of them Mu'tazilī), states that the imam capitulated. In Ḥanbal's account, the release seems plausible; but his account was rarely cited by later biographers. To supply the lack of a conclusive vindication of the imam and his doctrine, the hagiographers drew on Ṣāliḥ's account and supplemented it with elements taken from fabricated eye-witness reports. These reports claim that a golden hand (or an invisible one) appeared in midair (or from under the ground) in response to the imam's prayer that his trousers, shredded by the whips, not fall and expose his nakedness. A report of the fifth/eleventh century and afterwards combines this miracle-tale with old reports about the crowd of sympathetic Baghdadis who threatened to storm the palace. Later Ḥanbalī biographies complete the picture: the miracle, which incidentally proves the rightness of Ibn Ḥanbal's position, stirs the crowd and prompts the fearful caliph to free his prisoner.

The imam's defiance of the Inquisition earned him a reputation for "standing where the prophets stand." This account of the event, attributed to the ascetic Bishr b. al-Ḥārith, invokes the notion that it is the special task of prophets to rebuke kings. As we have seen, the shroud-wearer who accosted al-Ma'mūn apparently harbored similar sentiments, based on the Ḥadīth that "the best speech is a truthful word spoken before an unjust ruler." Viewed as a subject of narration, the tale of Ibn Ḥanbal's trial is itself another zealot-story. In its Mu'tazilī versions, it ends the way the others do: with a capitulation by the zealot. In its Ḥanbalī versions, however, it is the zealot who triumphs. If such stories indeed reflect the ways in which popular opposition was imagined, not only by the court but also by the *ahl al-sunna*, the appeal of the Ḥanbalī account becomes evident. In effect, it invokes Moses' defiance of Pharaoh rather than Sahl b. Salāma's capitulation to al-Ma'mūn. The latter incident, as we have seen, inspired stories that show off the caliph's disputational acumen. In light of the Qur'ānic precedent, however, such stories are dubious: the prophet (or his heir the *walī*) should triumph, not the ruler. By virtue of Ibn Ḥanbal's defiance, by virtue of his biographers' skill, or most likely by both, the Ḥanbalī tradition succeeded in retelling the story in a more satisfactory way.

The only catch was that al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'taṣim were not Pharaohs: they too were heirs of the Prophet, and Ibn Ḥanbal insisted on the necessity

of submitting to their authority. This accommodationism, particularly convenient after the Abbasid adoption of Sunnism, is reflected in the Ḥanbalī treatment of the caliphs. Only one biographical report vilifies al-Muʿtaṣim; the rest depict him as reluctant to harm Ibn Ḥanbal. Carrying this process a step further, the Mamluk-period biographers use their entries on Ibn Ḥanbal to place the Inquisition within a broader historical context. They argue that the caliphs, with the possible exception of al-Maʾmūn, were not evil; rather, they were misled by heretical scholars. To stave off periodic irruptions of heresy, God has dispatched a series of pious exemplars, of whom Ibn Ḥanbal was one, to keep the community on the right path. The imam's high station derives from his defense of the *sunna*, not his performance of miracles. Later Sunni biographers, particularly al-Dhahabī, thus fulminate against the attribution of miracles to the imam, attacking the reports on grounds of plausibility as well as of faulty transmission.

Even without the miracles, Ibn Ḥanbal's defiance of the Inquisition was sufficient to earn him the title of *walī Allāh* or "ally of God." Doctrinally, the title could refer simply to his service to the faith. As the later tradition makes clear, however, his contemporaries and followers understood it more broadly to mean that he was a source of *baraka*. In the sixth/eleventh century, Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣḫānī included him among the "allies of God," a category that embraces Companions, Ḥadīth-scholars, and renunciant mystics. He also labeled him a Sufi, much to the indignation of Ibn al-Jawzī, who declared the label an anachronism. Ibn al-Jawzī also castigated his predecessor for encouraging naive popular piety with baseless legends. Yet Ibn al-Jawzī himself gives us a vivid portrait of Ibn Ḥanbal as the object of cultic veneration, complete with relics, dreams, and a tomb-shrine. Evidently, the Sufi and Ḥanbalī traditions admitted a significant degree of cross-fertilization. However, this accommodation, like the reconciliation with the caliphate, had its limits: Ḥanbalī biographers are careful to cite the renunciant Bishr b. al-Ḥārith as declaring that, in defying the Inquisition, "Ibn Ḥanbal has stood where the prophets stand," a feat of bravery he could not match, and a concession of the imam's heirship to Muḥammad. Curiously enough, Ibn Ḥanbal just as frequently expresses his deference to the authority of his ascetic contemporary. The next chapter, which takes up Bishr and his fate in the Sufi tradition, will examine this relationship more closely.

The renunciant Bishr al-Ḥāfi

I cannot recall ever staying up all night, nor fasting for a day without eating in the evening. But God Almighty in His grace and generosity has people give a believer more credit than he deserves.

Bishr b. al-Ḥārith al-Ḥāfi, *apud* al-Qushayrī¹

Introduction

Among the virtues ascribed to the Prophet and the early Muslim community was ascetic renunciation. According to a Ḥadīth cited in Ibn Ḥanbal's *Kitāb al-zuhd*, a believer is entitled to nothing more than shade from the sun, a crust of bread, and a garment to cover his nakedness.² According to another Ḥadīth, a man once interrupted the Friday prayer to complain to the Prophet about eating only dates and wearing only rough cotton. "There will come a day," Muḥammad replied, "when you will wear garments like the drapery of the Ka'ba, with platters of food appearing before you day and night." However, he continued, "you are better off now than you will be then, because on that day you will be at each other's throats."³ When the Prophet died, he reportedly left no property in cash or slaves, only his armor, which he had pawned for thirty measures of grain.⁴ The renunciation ascribed to the Prophet and his Companions suggested a preoccupation with the next world rather than the present one, and a conviction that luxury and those who enjoyed it were an abomination in the sight of God.⁵ For the *ahl al-sunna*, renunciation of the world went hand in hand with scrupulosity (*wara'*). By living in austerity, one avoided possible sources of ritual pollution.⁶

For some proto-Sunnis, renunciation also signalled a manner of devotion to the *sunna* distinct from, and indeed preferable to, the study of Ḥadīth. Among the most famous representatives of this position was Abū Naṣr Bishr b. al-Ḥārith (c. 152/767–227/842), called al-Ḥāfi, "the barefoot."⁷ Bishr was born in a village near Marv in Khurasan, where he may have been a member

¹ Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 18.

² Ibn Ḥanbal, *Zuhd*, 45.

³ Ibid., I: 60.

⁴ Ibid., I: 35.

⁵ Goldziher, *Introduction*, 116ff.; Massignon, *Essai*, 116ff.

⁶ Kinberg, "What is meant by *zuhd*."

⁷ Massignon, *Essai*, 44, 114, 130, 208; Meier, "Bishr," in *EI2*; *ThG*, 3: 104–6; Jarrar, "Biṣr."

of a paramilitary youth gang. He came to Baghdad and studied Ḥadīth. Eventually, however, he renounced study and transmission, devoting himself instead to pious renunciation. He reportedly lived with one or more of his sisters, and never married. He let his hair grow, cultivated a long moustache, and wore rags or patched clothing; van Ess describes him as “the first dervish to appear in Baghdad.”⁸ His fame reportedly reached the caliph al-Ma’mūn, who surprisingly remarked: “There is no one left in this town before whom one need be abashed except for that elder, Bishr b. al-Ḥārith.”⁹ So many people flocked to his funeral procession that it took a full day to move his body from his house to his grave.¹⁰ His opinions, as far as they can be reconstructed, place him in the company of such figures as al-Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyāḍ (d. 187/803), whom he knew.¹¹ Al-Fuḍayl, like Bishr, criticized venal Ḥadīth-scholars, condemned innovation, kept aloof from the state, and shunned fame.¹² Both asserted that Ḥadīth-study, being a mechanical process anyone can master, offers no evidence for a believer’s sincerity and no guarantee of salvation.

One might expect Bishr’s attitude to alienate the *ahl al-sunna*, particularly the Ḥanbalīs, and there is some evidence that it did. However, the bulk of the evidence suggests that Ḥanbalī Ḥadīth-scholars strove to accommodate rather than reject the renunciant ascetics. According to biographers in both camps, Bishr’s relationship with Ibn Ḥanbal was good. In the imam’s *Kitāb al-zuhd*, Bishr appears as a transmitter of Ḥadīth, like the one on the believer’s entitlements cited above.¹³ In the *Kitāb al-waraʿ*, he serves as an exemplar in his own right: when al-Marrūdhī has a question about proper practice, Ibn Ḥanbal will ask what Bishr says about it.¹⁴ By the imam’s own admission, the two men never met.¹⁵ Even so, they had evidently managed to communicate via third parties, among them Abū Bakr al-Marrūdhī and Bishr’s sister Mukhkha. As Maher Jarrar has shown, several prominent transmitters of Bishr’s *akhbār* were Ḥadīth-scholars with close ties to Ibn Ḥanbal. These include ‘Abd Allāh, the imam’s son, who transmitted in turn to the Ḥanbalī authority Abū Bakr al-Qaṭīʿī (d. 368/978); Ibrāhīm b. ‘Alī al-Nīsabūrī (d. 265/878), in whose house the imam reportedly hid during the *miḥna*; Ibrāhīm b. Ishāq al-Ḥarbī (d. 285/898); and three others identified as Ḥanbalīs. This leaves over thirty transmitters of unknown association, but nevertheless indicates a significant overlap of Ḥanbalī and ascetic affiliations, extending to the transmission of biographical *akhbār*, in the third/ninth century and afterward.¹⁶

⁸ *TB* VII: 74 (no. 3517); *ThG*, III: 105. ⁹ Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 40; *TB* VII: 75 (no. 3517).

¹⁰ *TB* VII: 82 (no. 3517).

¹¹ Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 40; see also 12. The term for their association is *ṣaḥība*, which Mojaddedi elegantly glosses as “to have associated with, and thus obtained authority from” (“Reworking Time Past”, 22). ¹² Chabbi, “Fuḍayl.”

¹³ E.g., Ibn Ḥanbal, *Zuhd*, I: 43 (twice), 45 (twice). The *isnāds* pass from Bishr through Bayān b. al-Ḥakam and Muḥammad b. Ḥātim before reaching ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥanbal, the imam’s son.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Ibn Ḥanbal, *Waraʿ*, 31, 84–85. ¹⁵ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Waraʿ*, 70.

¹⁶ Jarrar, “Bīṣr,” 192–95. See also *TB*, XIII: 203 (no. 7177), in which a report about Maʿrūf al-Karkhī is narrated before an audience consisting of *jamāʿa min ahl al-ḥadīth wa-jamāʿa min al-zuhhād*.

The delicate balance eventually achieved, in the pages of biography at least, between the Ḥadīth-minded Sunnis and their ascetic colleagues, must be reckoned an achievement of the tradition. However, it is all the harder to discern in retrospect because of another biographical achievement, that of the Sufis. Sufism, one of the branches of Islamic mysticism, began to emerge, in conjunction with asceticism, during Bishr's lifetime. Mysticism is a mode of cognition that treats the objects of belief as objects of experience: what the Sufis called *taḥqīq* or "realization." The result was not *ʿilm* but rather *maʿrifa*: that is, "not new knowledge of any facts or doctrines, but rather the perception of an overall meaning in the world."¹⁷ In theory, mysticism need have nothing to do with asceticism. In practice, however, many religious traditions regard asceticism either as a purgative stage that prepares the way for mystical cognition, or as an appropriate response to a mystical conversion experience.¹⁸ In the particular case of Sufism, asceticism appears to have laid the groundwork for mysticism in part by rejecting Ḥadīth. As self-declared heirs of the Prophet, the Sufis sought more than conformance to his *sunna*: they aspired to his direct and loving relationship with God. Because of his critical attitude towards Ḥadīth, Bishr thus seemed to his Sufi biographers to have been among the founding members of their *ṭāʾifa*.

In a recent study of the Baghdad school, Christopher Melchert has dated the emergence of mysticism proper to the middle of the third/ninth century. Thereafter, the ascetical and mystical traditions continued to coexist, albeit with a good deal of friction between their respective exemplars.¹⁹ Bishr's biographies indeed contain hints that he clashed with younger contemporaries who were mystics. He appears to have had little to do with the influential lineage that began with the renunciants Maʿrūf al-Karkhī (d. 200/815–16) and al-Sarī al-Saqāʿī (d. 251/865) and continued with the mystics al-Kharrāz (d. 270/890–91?), al-Nūrī (d. 295/907–908), and al-Junayd (d. 298/911?).²⁰ Bishr also seems to have kept apart from his fellow ascetics, many of whom displayed a conspicuous devotion to the holy war (*jihād*): al-Saqāʿī, for example, fought on the Byzantine front, and Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 184/810) died in battle against the Turks.²¹ But Bishr did not join them, instead urging his contemporaries to "fear God and remain at home."²²

For Sufi biographers, these and similar pronouncements could easily serve as proof-texts for a mystical rather than an ascetic orientation. As a result, Bishr and a number of his ascetic contemporaries were drafted into the ranks of the Sufis. Indeed, they were granted the role of founders, a role better

¹⁷ Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, 169–70.

¹⁸ Underhill, *Mysticism*.

¹⁹ Melchert, "Transition."

²⁰ On this lineage see Bin ʿĀmir, "Al-Sarī," which describes al-Saqāʿī as marking the transition from asceticism to mysticism (214). Melchert characterizes Bishr as an ascetic, and identified most of the later figures as decidedly mystical in outlook ("Transition," 55ff.). I use the term "renunciant" in cases where it is unnecessary or impossible to identify a figure as decidedly ascetical or mystical, or wherever it is necessary to refer to the two groups together.

²¹ *HA*, X: 116–17; VIII:64. ²² Sarrāj, *Lumaʿ*, 207.

ascribed to the mystics Dhū al-Nūn and al-Junayd. Bishr's new status as a Sufi was marked by the introduction of certain topoi, including a conversion-story, that occur with suspicious regularity in the vitae of the founders. As the centuries passed, his biography expanded to include miracles and mystical insights without precedent in the earliest accounts of his life. Yet for all their exuberance in building a myth for Bishr, the Sufi biographers preserved (perhaps inadvertently, in some cases) the memory of his advocacy of a Sunnism distinct from that of Ibn Ḥanbal.

Early images of Bishr

The earliest extant account of Bishr, from the *Ṭabaqāt* of Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845), conveys the tension between Ḥadīth-study and asceticism that marked his career. The entry reads:

Bishr b. al-Hārith, God rest his soul. He had the *kunya* Abū Naṣr. He was of the *abnā'* of Khurasan, from Marv. He came to live in Baghdad, sought out Ḥadīth, and heard a great deal [of Ḥadīth] from Ḥammād b. Zayd, Sharīk, 'Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak, Hushaym, and others. Then he devoted himself to the worship of God, and withdrew from people, transmitting no Ḥadīth. He died in Baghdad on Wednesday, the eleventh of Rabī' I, 227. He was seen [in state] by a great number of Baghdādīs and others. He was buried at the Ḥarb Gate, aged seventy-six years.²³

This entry contains practically all the reliable facts we have on Bishr's life. The later sources have only a little to add regarding his origins and career. From Ibn Sa'd's term *abnā'*, we may infer that Bishr, like Ibn Ḥanbal, was a descendant of Khurasanis who had fought for the Abbasids during the revolution. Al-Sulamī adds that Bishr was "descended from chiefs."²⁴ The genealogy given in al-Khaṭīb's *Ta'rikh Baghdad* suggests that the family was among the early Iranian converts to Islam.²⁵ Bishr's family may thus have been a prominent one, but unlike Ibn Ḥanbal's has left no further trace in the extant sources. In any event, Bishr's Marwazi and *abnā'* origins place him among those Baghdādīs associated with proto-Sunnism and defiance of the *miḥna*. He appears to have begun his study of Ḥadīth in Marv and continued it in Baghdad. This is to be inferred from the fact that not all his teachers (as listed here and elsewhere) have entries in al-Khaṭīb's *Ta'rikh*. Of these teachers, the one likeliest to have influenced him is 'Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 181/797), author of some of the earliest extant works on asceticism. He taught that study without application of the *sunna* was useless, a conviction later authors were to attribute to ascetics in general and Bishr in particular.²⁶ It is easy to imagine that Ibn al-Mubārak's views prompted Bishr to abandon Ḥadīth-study altogether, though none of the extant sources say so. Finally, Bishr's activities after his withdrawal from Ḥadīth-circles earned him a reputation for

²³ Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, VII: 342. ²⁴ *Min awlād al-ru'asā'*; cited in *SAN*, X: 474.

²⁵ *TB*, VII: 71 (no. 3517); *ThG*, III: 105.

²⁶ *HA*, VIII: 162–90; Khoury, "Importance," 84–94; and *ThG*, III: 106.

piety sufficient to attract large numbers of mourners to his funeral. The Ḥarb Gate cemetery was to become a famous burial place for revered scholars, including Ibn Ḥanbal, but it is not clear whether the site already had that reputation when Bishr was buried there.²⁷

Bishr's truncated Ḥadīth-career and his reputation for piety are reflected in the *rijāl*-tradition. Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) lists him among the Ḥadīth-scholars but notes that after a certain point he "kept away from people, transmitting no Ḥadīth until his death." He also refers to him, for the first time in the extant tradition, as "the barefoot."²⁸ Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/938–39) declares Bishr to have been a reliable transmitter, and names his teachers and students.²⁹ With Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī (d. 354/965), we learn more about his fame outside Ḥadīth-circles. After declaring him reliable, Ibn Ḥibbān adds that "his proclivities to asceticism, and covert renunciation and scrupulosity, are too well known to warrant plunging into a description of them here." The only detail he supplies is that Bishr "followed [Sufyān] al-Thawrī in *fiqh* and *waraʿ*."³⁰ The meaning of this comparison emerges from Ibn Ḥibbān's entry on al-Thawrī (d. 161/778), whom he describes as a famously pious Ḥadīth-scholar whose tomb he had visited.³¹

For his early biographers, then, Bishr was a Ḥadīth-scholar distinguished for his asceticism and scrupulosity. They approve of his reputation, although they evidently deemed it beneath their dignity to recount reports of it. None bothers to explain, for example, how the nickname "barefoot" came to be applied to him. Moreover, they give no explanation for his abandonment of Ḥadīth-study. One biographer does not even mention it, and another keeps him in the Ḥadīth-fold by comparing him to Sufyān al-Thawrī, who despite his piety did not abandon Ḥadīth-transmission. The *rijāl*-biographers thus appear torn between the impulse to let Bishr's fame redound to the glory of their *ṭāʾifa*, and the duty of pointing out that it was only after he abandoned Ḥadīth-study that he gained a reputation for piety.

The emergence of Sufism

Even as Bishr was making his way through the *rijāl*-tradition, the Sufi biographers had begun to claim him for their own. In doing so, they preserved the tales that Ibn Ḥibbān thought too well known to repeat. Ironically, it is these very tales that permit us to conclude that Bishr was not a Sufi at all.³² Before looking at these reports, however, it will be necessary to survey how the Sufi tradition attained sufficient momentum to carry Bishr along with it.

²⁷ ʿAlī, *Baghdād*, I: 142–45.

²⁸ Ibn Qutayba, *Maʿārif*, 525.

²⁹ Rāzī, *Jarh*, I: 1: 356.

³⁰ Bustī, *Thiqāt*, VIII: 143. *Fiqh* in this context doubtless refers to pious insight into the meaning of the Qurʾān, not "jurisprudence" in the later, technical sense (van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, 79).

³¹ Bustī, *Mashāhīr*, 169–70; see further Lecomte, "Sufyān."

³² I am indebted to Melchert, "Transition," for demonstrating the validity of such an approach.

In Bishr's day, a *ṣūfī* meant an ascetic who wore a coarse, undyed woolen cloak. Massignon has found some ten figures before c. 300 to whom the term was applied, the earliest being the Kūfan ascetic Abū Hāshim (d. 150/767–68).³³ To signal an ascetic vocation, one could also wear a *muraqqa'* or "patched cloak."³⁴ Such practices were controversial: woolen cloaks, while reminiscent of the coarse garments of the first Muslims, also resembled the attire of Christian ascetics. Moreover, they could give the wearer an unearned reputation for piety.³⁵ Unfazed by these suspicions, the Baghdad ascetics who were specifically mystical in orientation began to apply the term "Sufi" to themselves. Once adopted, it came to designate the *tā'īfa* of mystics. As Jaqueline Chabbi has shown, however, the Sufis were not the only early mystics in Islam. The common belief that they were is due to the efforts of their theorists and biographers: confronted with representatives of other mystical traditions, they assimilated those whose opinions they could accept and excluded the rest.³⁶

Unlike the ascetics, the Sufis taught contemplation and dissolution of the self in a loving God, and emphasized the "states" and "stations" through which the believer passes in his relationship with Him.³⁷ The novelty of these teachings is evident from the profusion of contrastive self-descriptions ascribed to renunciants in both camps. Abū Yazīd al-Bastāmī (d. 261/875), for example, declared that a mystic (*ʿarīf*) is preoccupied with hope, while an ascetic (*zāhid*) is preoccupied with diet. Some believers, he added, are unworthy of mystical knowledge (*maʿrifa*), and so God has preoccupied them with worship (*ʿibāda*).³⁸ The ascetics responded in kind: al-Fuḍayl, for example, declared that "whoever sits with an innovator receives no wisdom," and al-Saqāfī condemned those who thought that esoteric knowledge could override the common duties of religion.³⁹

Melchert has argued persuasively that the conflict between the ascetics and the mystics came to a head in 264/877, when the ascetic preacher Ghulām Khalīl (d. 275/888) asked the Baghdad authorities to arrest the mystics. God, said Ghulām Khalīl, should be feared, not loved. The most effective response to this threat of persecution was that of the Baghdad Sufi al-Junayd. First, he couched his mystical teachings in such obscure language that his detractors (not to mention some of his fellow mystics) could hardly understand them,

³³ Massignon, *Essai*, 131–33. A group of vigilantes who rebelled in Alexandria 200/815–16 also bore the name (Melchert, "Transition," 58, n. 43).

³⁴ Massignon, *Essai*, 53, 198; also 230, on the unsewn sheepskin cloaks of the Karrāmīya.

³⁵ Ibid., 131–32; van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, 43–44.

³⁶ Chabbi, "Remarques," and "Reflexions."

³⁷ Note however that the states and stations did not always have a mystical meaning; see Melchert, "Transition," 62.

³⁸ Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 74 and 71; Mojaddedi, "Reworking Time Past", 47–53. For all his emphasis on mysticism, al-Bastāmī was no less an ascetic: he declared that he had attained gnosis by virtue of "an empty belly and an unclothed frame" (Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 74).

³⁹ Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 10 and 52. Later it was often the mystics themselves who made such statements, doubtless to protect themselves (Melchert, "Transition," 64–65).

much less object to them. Second, he “put a new stress on outwardly acceptable behavior and self-description.” Finally, he proposed a tripartite division of devout believers that included a place for the Sufis. The three divisions, as Melchert has shown, correspond to “the ordinary devout,” “the earlier ascetics,” and “the speculative mystics.”⁴⁰ Al-Junayd’s achievements proved of lasting importance to the development not only of Sufism but of Sufi biography and perhaps of early Arabic biography in general. His notion of a division of labor recurs in the writings of later Sufis, where it amounts to a bid for equal standing for the *lā’ifā*. In response, representatives of other *lā’ifās* made counter-assertions of their own heirship to the Prophet. Such a scenario, at any rate, explains the appearance of elaborate etiological narratives in biographical compilations of the fourth/tenth century and afterward. It also explains why third/ninth century *rijāl*-biographies contain no defense of the Ḥadīth-mission: that mission had yet to be challenged by the mystics.⁴¹

Within the Sufi tradition, the claim to heirship was inevitably asserted in the context of a proposed division of labor among the Prophet’s heirs. According to al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988–89), the most prolific of the fourth/tenth-century Sufi theorists, there are three kinds of knowledge and three groups (*aṣṇāf*) of “knowers.” First come the Ḥadīth-scholars, who preserve the *sunna*. Next come the jurists, who interpret it. Then come the Sufis, who are the heirs of the Prophets and the “knowers” mentioned frequently in the Qur’ān (e.g., 3: 18: “those who have knowledge witness that there is no God but He”). The Sufis accept all that the Ḥadīth-scholars and jurists have decided. Unlike them, however, they seek to ascend to lofty states of worship and devotion, a privilege (*takḥṣīṣ*) not granted to the other ‘ulamā’. As ascetics, the Sufis prefer hunger and poverty over satiety and wealth. They evince humility and kindness to all. They dedicate themselves to the worship of God at the expense of all personal comforts and desires. Finally, they practice meditation leading to the diminishment of the soul or self and the attainment of the object of desire, i.e., God.⁴²

Al-Sarrāj’s contemporary al-Kalābādhī (d. 380/990 or 385/995) makes even more ambitious claims for the Sufis. God, he says, has blessed certain believers, apparently from the beginning of time. After these believers master the knowledge that study can impart, they inherit an ancestral knowledge that permits them to learn “on the authority of God” (*‘an Allāh*). Such an elect has always existed, passing on its knowledge from generation to generation, and serving as a guide for the community. Al-Kalābādhī’s description of them, while compatible with al-Sarrāj’s, is much more exuberant, and stresses their direct descent from Muḥammad:

They have understood through God, and made their way toward Him, shunning all else. Their lights have pierced the veils, and their glances flicker about the Throne. They

⁴⁰ Melchert, “Transition,” 68–70.

⁴¹ See above, p. 14.

⁴² Sarrāj, *Luma’*, 2–12; see also Mackeen, “Ṣūfī-Qawm Movement.”

are spiritual bodies, heavenlike on earth, lordly among creatures: watching in silence, present and absent, kings in rags! They are strangers of every tribe, possessors of virtues, and guiding lights. Their ears are open and their hearts are pure. Their attributes are hidden, as befits an elite of Sufis lambescent in their purity. They are the treasures God has deposited in His creation, and His elect among His creatures. God commended them to His Prophet, and entrusted them with his secrets. They occupied the Prophet's bench during his lifetime, and became the best of his community after his death. And so they continued, with each calling to his fellow, the ones before summoning the ones to follow, each using the voice of a conduct that removed the need for words.⁴³

A third Sufi theorist, the anonymous author of the *Adab al-mulūk*, is certain that Sufis are better exemplars than the representatives of other *ṭā'īfas*. In the past, he says, scholars were *ṣiddīqūn*: that is, sober, ascetic, and mindful of the afterlife.⁴⁴ Today, however, *'ulamā'* of every type (jurists, Ḥadīth-scholars, Qur'ān-readers, exegetes, and philologists) "fall short of putting their knowledge into practice, being content instead to study." Almost all of them pursue worldly gain, clamor after fame, disdain the poor, swagger pompously about, consume impermissible foods, and quibble over trivialities. As a result, "the very knowledge they possess bears witness against them." After thorough study of the matter, he has reached the conclusion that no *ṭā'īfa* "is more committed to the *sunna* inwardly and outwardly, secretly and openly, contractually, intentionally, and practically, than that group known by the name of Sufis."⁴⁵

Of the fourth/tenth century theorists, al-Sarrāj has the most to report about Bishr. Although the statements he ascribes to him contain little of a specifically mystical nature, they evidently fit in well enough with al-Sarrāj's notions of Sufism. He cites Bishr as enjoining others to "fear God in solitude," not love Him.⁴⁶ Other reports emphasize his scrupulosity, the characteristic virtue of the proto-Sunni ascetics. We are told, for example, that he was physically unable to extend his hand toward ritually suspect food.⁴⁷ He is even described as admonishing a group of visitors who were showing off their patched garments. When one of them, a young man, retorted that they wore patches only to spread God's religion, Bishr relented and declared them worthy of the *muraqqa'*.⁴⁸ These reports stress asceticism rather than mysticism. Others, however, could easily be construed as foreshadowing the doctrines of Sufism. In one report, Bishr recommends not only solitude but renunciation of any sort of social obligation. "Were I forced to see to a livelihood and attend to the needs [of a family], I might well become [something as unlikely as] a policeman."⁴⁹ In another, he seems to anticipate the *tawakkul* (absolute dependence)

⁴³ Kalābādihī, *Ta'arruf*, 26–27.

⁴⁴ On *ṣiddīq* as a term for the "proto-Sufis" see also Homerin, "Ibn Taymīya's *Al-ṣūfiyya*," 221.

⁴⁵ Radtke, ed. *Adab*, 1–6. ⁴⁶ Sarrāj, *Luma'*, 207. ⁴⁷ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 187–88. In the biographies of ascetics, the mystics are often represented by argumentative young men. See further Bin 'Āmir, "Al-Sarī," 198; Mojaddedi, "Reworking Time Past", 70.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 200.

of the Sufis. He once made spindles for a living, but abandoned this trade when asked what he would do if he became blind and deaf.⁵⁰ Finally, we have his critical attitude toward the Ḥadīth-scholars. He is quoted as enjoining them to pay the alms-tax on Ḥadīth, i.e., to put into practice five reports for every two hundred they learn.⁵¹ Pronouncements like these were evidently susceptible to being adduced in support of Sufi positions. Thus al-Sarrāj's contemporary al-Kalābādhī includes Bishr (unfortunately without explanation) in a list of masters who taught Sufism and described the states and stations of the mystics.⁵²

Bishr in early Sufi biography

The *Luma'*, the *Ta'arruf*, and the *Adab al-mulūk* exemplify the efforts of the Sufi *ṭā'ifa* to carve out a niche for itself within the framework of Sunnism. The only component of *ṭā'ifa*-identity still needed was a systematic biographical compilation to name and describe the Sufi exemplars, including Bishr. This task was carried out by an author of the next generation, Abū 'Abd al-Raḥman al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021).⁵³ Like al-Kalābādhī, al-Sulamī held that in every generation there are men who take up the Prophet's task of calling their fellows to God. During the first generations of Islam, these "allies of God" were to be found among the ascetics (the subject of his lost *Kitāb al-zuhd*). Then there appeared "the masters of the [mystical] states who spoke in the language of unity, experienced the oneness of God, and applied the method of detachment." These "later *awliyā'*" are the Sufis, the subject of his *Ṭabaqāt*.⁵⁴

As his introduction shows, al-Sulamī was clearly aware of the distinction between asceticism and mysticism. However, his historical scheme does not allow for the co-existence of ascetics and mystics in a single generation. Confronted with precisely that state of affairs, he chose to include certain ascetics among the "Sufis." This is evident from the composition of the first generation, which begins with Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 163/779–80) and ends with Ḥamdūn al-Qaṣṣār (d. 271/884–85). Some of the figures included are clearly mystics, such as Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 245/860 or 246/861).⁵⁵ One subject, al-Muḥāsibī, does not refer to himself as a Sufi in any of his extant works.⁵⁶ Many, finally, are "pronouncedly ascetical." These include al-Fuḍayl, Ma'rūf al-Karkhī, and Bishr al-Ḥāfi'.⁵⁷ The word "Sufism" itself (*taṣawwuf*) appears first only in the entry on Abū Ḥaḍḍ al-Nisabūrī (d. c. 270/883–84), the fifteenth member of the first generation.⁵⁸ As Jawid Mojaddedi has suggested, al-Sulamī appears to have cast his net especially wide in the first generation in

⁵⁰ Ibid, 194–95. The implication is that he would be just as dependent on God either way.

⁵¹ Ibid., 161. ⁵² Kalābādhī, *Ta'arruf*, 36.

⁵³ On earlier works (now lost), see Sharība's introduction to Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 50–51.

⁵⁴ Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1–3; 518.

⁵⁵ Melchert calls him "the earliest to seem clearly from his own sayings more mystical than ascetical" ("Transition," 57). ⁵⁶ Van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, 6. ⁵⁷ Melchert, "Transition," 54ff.

⁵⁸ Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 119.

order to bridge the gap between the last *zuhhād*, whom he associated with the generations after the Prophet, and the first Sufis.⁵⁹

To manage such a diverse group of subjects, al-Sulami imposed a rigid format on his entries. Nearly every entry contains a few biographical facts followed by twenty *ḥikāyāt*, that is, “speeches, attributes, and reports of conduct,” the first of which is almost always a Prophetic Ḥadīth recited on the subject’s authority.⁶⁰ Although the Ḥadīth seems intended to situate Sufism in a firmly Sunni context, the other *ḥikāyāt* often subvert this aim. For one thing, they resemble Ḥadīth in their structure and their presumption of apodictic authority. For another, they often contain criticism of the *‘ulamā’*. Al-Fuḍayl, for example, warns aspirants to stay away from Qur’ān-readers because “when they like you, they praise you groundlessly, and when they don’t like you, they denounce you and people believe them.”⁶¹ Ibn Abī al-Ḥawārī adds that they fail to understand the Qur’ān they recite:

I read the Qur’ān, and I look at a verse, and my mind is overwhelmed by it. The Qur’ān-memorizers astound me! They recite the speech of God [all the time] – how can they sleep at night, or occupy themselves with anything of this world? If only they understood what they were reciting, and grasped it truly, and delighted in it, and thrilled to the sound of it in their own ears, they would so rejoice in the gift and the guidance they had been given that they would never sleep.⁶²

The Ḥadīth-scholars, similarly, are often unworthy of the learning they possess. Dhū al-Nūn berates them for “using their learning to make money,” and al-Saqāfī regards their enterprise as propaedeutic at best: “If you begin as an abstinent and then move to the writing down of Ḥadīth, you lapse; but if you start with writing Ḥadīth and then take up abstinence, you make it all the way.”⁶³ This is because the pursuit of knowledge should take place without intermediaries. “I came to know God through God,” says al-Baṣṭāmī, “and learned everything else by the light of God.”⁶⁴

Given Bishr’s abandonment of Ḥadīth-scholarship, one would expect to hear him adding his voice to this chorus. Surprisingly, however, one does not. The *ḥikāyāt* in his entry contain maxims of good conduct, either by direct command (“Work on reducing affectation, not on creating it”) or in the form of generalities (“You will never taste the sweetness of devotion until you build a wall of steel between yourself and your desires”); expressions of the speaker’s preferences or emotional states, with ethical implications (“I’ve been craving roast meat for forty years, but I’ve never had even a dirham to buy any”); enumerations of people blessed or cursed (“There are four whom God elevated because of the propriety of their diet,” followed by a list); and a cryptic prediction of the future (“There will come upon the people a time when the eye of the wise man will know no rest; there will come upon them a time when the stupid rise above the intelligent”).⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Mojaddedi, “Reworking Time Past”, 22.

⁶⁰ Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 3. For a more detailed analysis, see Mojaddedi, “Reworking Time Past”, 16–53. ⁶¹ Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 11. ⁶² Ibid., 102. ⁶³ Ibid., 55. ⁶⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 41–47.

Far from denouncing Ḥadīth, Bishr appears to have recited and sought it out, even among his fellow ascetics. According to other entries in the *Ṭabaqāt*, he related a Ḥadīth on eating garlic to Muḥammad b. Abī al-Ward, and requested two Ḥadīth-reports from ʿĪsā b. Yūnus.⁶⁶ Finally and most strikingly, he is depicted as engaging in an argument with a Sufi. An eyewitness reports:

I was at Bishr's, and he was speaking of contentment and reconciliation. Suddenly a Sufi (*raḡul min al-mutaṣawwifa*) spoke up: "Abū Naṣr! You refrain from accepting charity from people to make them esteem you more. If you want to know what renunciation and contempt for the world really are, accept people's charity and let yourself be humbled before them; then give away what they give you to the poor, and trust in God, and take your food from Beyond."

This stirred up Bishr's associates. Bishr then replied: "You there, listen to my answer. There are three kinds of poor men. The first kind do not ask, and do not accept anything given to them. These are the spirituals; if they ask God for anything, He gives it to them; and if they swear an oath by God, He fulfills it for them.

"The second kind do not ask, but accept what is given. They are the middlers; they live by trust in God and dependence on Him. It is for them that laden tables will be set in the Enclosure of Holiness.

"The third type adopt forbearance and hold out as long as they can. When their need becomes too great, they go out to people, but their hearts are with God as they beg, and their sincerity makes up for their begging."

The man said, "I understand. God bless you!"⁶⁷

Not even Bishr, it seems, could escape reproach by nameless zealots. This zealot is identified as a Sufi, implying that Bishr and his disciples belonged to some other group.⁶⁸ As al-Junayd was later to do, Bishr divides the renunciants into three categories. However, none of his categories invoke mysticism as a criterion. The most sublime of the three is the *rūḥānī*, who appears identical to the *walī*: that is, one whose prayers are answered. It is to this category that Bishr himself must belong, since (as his Sufi challenger points out) he has never been seen to beg. Having understood the implication, the Sufi acknowledges Bishr's high station, even though there is nothing explicitly mystical about it.

Bishr in the later biographical tradition

By placing him among the first generation of Sufis, al-Sulamī ratified for posterity Bishr's membership in the *ṭāʾifa*. Yet the entry itself tells us little more

⁶⁶ Ibid., 249, 252–53. The texts deal with eating garlic, the assessment of *ṣadaqa*, and "women's *jihād*" (i.e., the pilgrimage) respectively. None displays any conspicuous ascetic or mystical significance. ⁶⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁸ Of al-Sulamī's subjects, four are described as associates of Bishr: Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (*Ṭabaqāt*, 227); Muḥammad and Aḥmad, the sons of Abī al-Ward (ibid., 249); and Abū Ḥamza al-Bazzāz (ibid., 295). One man called a Sufi, namely Abū Ḥamza Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm, is described as having "sat with" Bishr (*ṬH*, I: 268; see further below, pp. 179–80).

about him than do the scattered citations compiled by al-Sarrāj. In both works, all Bishr does is speak. Only in the later biographical tradition do we glimpse him through the eyes of those who watched him act. The first extant work to preserve reports of his life among ordinary men and women is the *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* of al-Sulamī's student Abū Nu'aym al-Isfahānī (d. 430/1038). Abū Nu'aym, as we have seen, wrote his *Ḥilya* to commemorate the *awliyā'* or "allies of God." His entries are much more extensive than al-Sulamī's, as if he intended to have his subjects demonstrate as many of the virtues of the *awliyā'* as possible.

In his introduction, Abū Nu'aym tells us what these virtues are. The *awliyā'*, he says, inspire the loyalty of good men and the envy of martyrs and prophets. They evoke mindfulness of God in their associates. They are immune to temptation, and live in austerity. Their faith can produce miracles and cause their prayers to be answered. They are a minority whose number is constant and for whose sake God increases nations, causes the rain to fall, and prevents catastrophe.⁶⁹ They have understood the true nature of the present world and rejected it. They cannot be tempted or dazzled by worldly glory. They are impassioned by God and enamored of His speech. They are sources of guidance, characterized by subtlety and sincerity. They are expansive in public and anxious in private, and they fulfill all their religious duties promptly and completely.⁷⁰ Those who live this way are *awliyā'*, and therefore obviously Sufis as well. To explain Sufism, Abū Nu'aym cites Ja'far al-Ṣādiq: "If one lives according to the exoteric aspect of the Prophet, one is a *ṣunni*; if one lives according to his esoteric aspect, one is a Sufi."⁷¹ Other groups such as the Ḥadīth-scholars are allowed to be heirs of the Prophet, but only to part of his legacy; the rest of the legacy – the hidden part, conveniently enough – is the exclusive property of the Sufis.

Although Abū Nu'aym's entry on Bishr follows no discernible order,⁷² it contains all the elements of a life, and the groundwork for a legend. It explains that Bishr ran with a gang in his youth, then had a dramatic conversion experience. He left Ḥadīth-scholarship because the worldliness of his colleagues repelled him. He shunned fame, but was fated to endure it because of his conspicuous self-denial, which included walking barefoot (sometimes). He also had a sister, or perhaps three sisters, whose concern for his welfare endangered his pursuit of perfect renunciation. Even so, one sister, Mukhkha, was so scrupulous that she sought advice from Ibn Ḥanbal. All these narrative elements will persist, often with conspicuous elaboration, into the later tradition. The account that follows will analyze Abū Nu'aym's presentation of these themes, and then survey some of the contributions later biographers made to each.

⁶⁹ That is, they are the *abdāl* (see above, pp. 143–44). ⁷⁰ *HA*, I: 5–17.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, I: 20. Note the non-technical use of *ṣunni* (Ja'far was the sixth Imam of the Twelver Shiites).

⁷² On the structure of the *Ḥilya* and its entries, see Mojaddedi, "Rewriting Time Past", 55ff.

*Bishr's conversion*⁷³

According to a report in the *Hilya*, people spoke of Bishr as they would speak of a prophet. Asked how his career had begun, he replied:

It was by the grace of God. What can I tell you? I was a hooligan (*ʿayyār*) and the head of a gang. I was crossing [the street] one day and noticed a piece of paper in the road. I picked it up and found there 'In the Name of the Merciful and Compassionate God.' I wiped it off and put it in my pocket. I had two dirhams with me, which were all I owned, and I went to the perfumers and spent [the dirhams] on a bottle of scent, which I rubbed on the paper. That night I fell asleep and dreamed that someone was saying to me: 'Bishr b. al-Ḥārith! You have lifted Our Name from the ground and perfumed it, and We shall exalt your name in this world and the next!' Then everything that happened happened.⁷⁴

In the *Ta'riḫ Baghdād*, Bishr's maternal uncle 'Alī b. Khashram reports that his nephew "used to run with a gang (*kān yatafattā*) in his youth, and was wounded."⁷⁵ However, the words *ʿayyār* and *fatā* (from which Ibn Khashram's *yatafattā* is derived) are not exactly synonymous in this period. The former refers to the "naked men" and "prisoners" who fought for al-Amīn during the siege of Baghdad and took to looting when he ran short of funds.⁷⁶ *Fatā* refers more generally to members of urban paramilitary associations, including local toughs as well as professional criminals.⁷⁷ Since Ibn Khashram pairs the mention of Bishr's *fatā*-activity with a reference to his Marwazī origins, it would seem that Bishr participated in some sort of young men's fraternity in his native regions before coming to Iraq.⁷⁸ His being an *ʿayyār* in the strict sense is on the other hand unlikely. During the siege of Baghdad he would have been some forty-five years old, presumably well advanced in his career as a renunciant, and unlikely to take up mercenary violence. The use of the term *ʿayyār* in his conversion story thus suggests a retelling by a transmitter concerned more for effect than for accuracy.⁷⁹

Apart from Bishr's involvement with the *ʿayyārūn* or the *fityān*, his conversion story, as Jarrar has pointed out, appears to be as much a topos as a biographical fact.⁸⁰ Indeed, its most conspicuous feature is a distinct resemblance to the conversion tales associated with other first-generation "Sufis." Al-

⁷³ By conversion I mean "intensification" within a single religious tradition (James, *Varieties*, 189–258; Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 39 and 172–74). The classical Arabic terms are *tawba* "act of repentance" and, in this context, *taṣawwuf* "becoming a Sufi."

⁷⁴ Ibid., 8: 336.

⁷⁵ *TB* VII: 71 (no. 3517); also Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'riḫ kabīr*, VII: 232; *SAN*, X: 474; see further *ThG*, III: 105 n. 56. 'Alī is also called Bishr's paternal uncle (Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 40) and even his nephew (Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'riḫ kabīr*, 7: 229). ⁷⁶ See Hoffmann, "Pöbel."

⁷⁷ For the *fityān* as criminals see above, pp. 139–41, referring to the reign of al-Mutawakkil, and as strongarm men see *TB* IX: 289 (no. 4838), where a judge (Bishr's teacher Sharīk) calls for some *fityān al-hayy* to carry convicts to the *ḥabs*.

⁷⁸ Note, however, that other versions of the story do not mention his *ʿiyāra* (e.g., Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 18; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Siḥa*, II: 183).

⁷⁹ But cf. Cahen, "Futuwwa," II: 961–62, who stresses the fluidity of these designations.

⁸⁰ Jarrar, "Bīṣr," 192.

Fuḍayl b. 'Iyād, for example, is supposed to have been a bandit (*shāṭir yaqta' al-ṭarīq*) before he repented. Chabbi, who has her doubts about that story, notes that comparable reports appear in the biographies of “an entire series of early figures” and that the topos “appears to be part of a broader set of issues that have yet to be defined and analyzed.”⁸¹ In his study of al-Sarī al-Saqāṭī, Tawfiq Bin 'Āmir suggests that his subject's repentance-tale is a literary representation of what was doubtless a long and complex process of conversion. Al-Saqāṭī, though never described as a criminal, repented with conspicuous suddenness, and (like Bishr) as a result of performing a charitable act.⁸²

What explains the conspicuous similarities in these reports? In any religious tradition, converts learn to narrate their experience in conformance with models supplied by the community to which they have converted (or within which they are renewing their faith). Indeed, their ability to do so serves as a sign of the validity of their experience.⁸³ A comparable process of transformation occurs in literary traditions that seek to describe the conversions of historical figures. To their credit, the Arabic biographers do not use the technical language of later Sufism when they retell the repentance-stories of the early ascetics. Even so, the stories do appear to respond to the needs of a *ṭā'ifa* engaged in staking out a claim to knowledge distinct from that of Ḥadīth-scholars and other *'ulamā'*.

Ḥadīth-scholars, jurists, and Qur'ān-readers all attained their *'ilm* through a rationalized process of study and advancement culminating in public recognition of their competence. Significantly, the biographies of exemplars in these traditions lack conversion-tales like those ascribed to the Sufis. The Sufis, on the other hand, issued their definitions, exhortations, and denunciations (al-Sulamī's *ḥikāyāt*) on the basis of experience (*taḥqīq*), sometimes described – in an appropriation of *isnād*-terminology – as transmission from God. Unfortunately, the resulting insights could not meet the standards of authenticity and relevance upheld by the other *ṭā'ifas*.⁸⁴ To overcome this disadvantage, the biographers of Sufis had to make their subjects' formative experiences as persuasive a basis for authority as the book-learning of the *'ulamā'*. Conversion-stories like Bishr's stress the immediacy of the conversion experience and its transformative effect, substantiating the notion that one can learn from God as well as from men. To render the transformation as convincing as possible, the convert should also turn aside from a life of crime, or at least from some observable attachment to the material world. Bishr spent his last two dirhams to perfume the name of God, and al-Saqāṭī repented after expressing relief that his shop had not burned in a market fire. In Bishr's case, too, the story validates his conversion experience by invoking his standing among the people, who spoke of him as if he were a prophet.

⁸¹ Chabbi, “Fuḍayl,” 332–33. ⁸² TB IX: 178 (no. 4769); Bin 'Āmir, “Al-Sarī,” 194–96.

⁸³ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, esp. 102–64.

⁸⁴ Cf. Bishr's verses on this subject (*HA*, VIII: 345).

Bishr's rejection of Ḥadīth

In a recent study of the Ḥadīth-activity of the early renunciants, Melchert has confirmed that many in al-Sulamī's first generations were noted transmitters. Eventually, however, the renunciants and the Ḥanbalīs (the community with whom they were most closely associated) "pulled apart." As ascetic and mystical practices became more demanding, renunciants evidently had little time to spend on Ḥadīth-study. Many early ascetics found their scholarly colleagues venal and self-important. Most important, perhaps, the criticism of transmitters, an integral part of Ḥadīth-study, seemed too much like *ghayba*, "back-biting" or "slander."⁸⁵ Even *rijāl*-critics were not immune to doubt on this point. Melchert cites the particularly vivid case of Ibn Abī Ḥātim, author of the *Jarḥ wa 'l-ta'dīl*, who "put down the book he was holding and wept uncontrollably" when reminded that some of the transmitters the critics had condemned might already be in Heaven.⁸⁶

If Bishr made a sudden and dramatic decision to abandon the study of Ḥadīth, the sources do not treat it as a separate conversion experience. They do, however, cite him, with increasing frequency, as a critic of the scholars. The biographer to devote the most attention to the matter is Abū Nu'aym, whose reports were taken up by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī. Both were prominent transmitters, and their willingness to cite Bishr's anti-Ḥadīth pronouncements is striking. According to the *Hilya*, Bishr gave up Ḥadīth because he found the scholars distasteful. "The blot upon Ḥadīth," he says, "is the people who study it." The Companions took the Prophet's knowledge, "clung to it, preserved it, and acted in accordance with it." Today's scholars, however, do not practice what they teach. Worse yet, they use their learning for worldly gain: "Knowledge has fallen to a crowd who use it to earn a living." Once, he began to recite, then interrupted himself: "May God forgive me! It has reached me that 'so-and-so related to me on the authority of so-and-so' is one of the gates leading to worldly gain." In another report he proclaims: "No one should mention any Ḥadīth in a situation where he has some worldly need and [can use the Ḥadīth] to help him get what he needs." In several reports, he offers another argument: because he wants to recite, he should not. In one exchange, an exasperated petitioner asks him what excuse he would offer God for his refusal to teach. He replies: "I would say, 'Lord, my soul wished to recite Ḥadīth and so I refused [so as] not to give my soul what it desired.'"⁸⁷ Evidently, too, he was aware of the *ghayba*-problem. One report has him say: "Do not ask about a question that entails knowledge of the faults of others."⁸⁸

In the *Ta'rikh Baghdād*, al-Khaṭīb states that Bishr "knew much Ḥadīth," and lists his teachers (including Mālik b. Anas) and even some students. However, "he found transmission distasteful, and buried his books on that

⁸⁵ Melchert, "Early Ascetics," esp. 10–12.

⁸⁶ *SAN*, XIII: 268; cited in Melchert, "Early Ascetics," 11.

⁸⁷ *HA*, XIII: 345, 340–41, 339, 355. ⁸⁸ *HA*, VIII: 349.

account.” He reportedly declared that Ḥadīth is “no weapon by which to gain the Next World, nor is it proper preparation for the grave.” He was against saying *ḥaddathanī* (“he related to us”) because “there is a certain sweetness to it. You have said *ḥaddathanī*, and people wrote it down, but what ever came of it?” Ḥadīth had become just another means for attaining worldly ends; he could not imagine how its students would be saved, nor why those who memorized it did so at all. He prayed God to make him forget all the Ḥadīth he had ever memorized, and hoped to bury his books while he could. According to one report, he was as good as his word: the narrator reports having buried eighteen loads of books belonging to Bishr.

Lest, however, the reader imagine that Bishr rejected Ḥadīth altogether, al-Khaṭīb cites three of his more moderate pronouncements:

Often I come across something – that is, a Ḥadīth – I want to disseminate, but it seems incorrect to me.

No one should recite a Ḥadīth unless it is correct. Yet when someone claims to have authenticated [a report], we say: “You’re a weak transmitter.”

I know nothing better than [the pursuit of knowledge] when the object of it is God.⁸⁹

The first statement reveals that Bishr may have abstained from Ḥadīth-transmission for fear of disseminating false reports. The second suggests that the scholars treated one other with suspicion, and teaching only invited one’s colleagues to judge and condemn one’s reliability. The last statement softens the effect of the preceding reports by suggesting that Ḥadīth-study is reprehensible only when its practitioners undertake it for the wrong reasons. To the extent that such questions exercised the conscience of many Ḥadīth-scholars, there was nothing distinctively “Sufi” about them. Hence, it would seem, the willingness of Abū Nu‘aym and al-Khaṭīb to cite Bishr’s polemical statements about Ḥadīth-study.

For later scholars in both camps, however, the tension between the Sufis (actual or back-projected) and the Ḥadīth-scholars appears to have been symbolic of a radical difference in orientation. For their part, the Ḥadīth-transmitters had their own reasons to be dubious of the renunciants, at least in retrospect. As Louis Massignon has argued, the construction of renunciant piety depended to a great extent on gnomic or ecstatic utterances (like al-Sulamī’s *ḥikāyāt*) that were passed off as Ḥadīth. A renunciant might commune with a dead prophet and call the resulting “preternatural communication” a *ḥadīth mursal*, that is, one known well enough to be cited with an incomplete *isnād*. Similarly, he might commune with God and label the result a *ḥadīth qudsī*, the term usually reserved for communication from God to the Prophet.⁹⁰ Such claims provoked dismay among the scholars, not only because the attributions seemed disingenuous, but also – one may guess – because the notion of continuing revelation of God’s will negated the historical mission of

⁸⁹ TB VII: 73–75 (no. 3517).

⁹⁰ Massignon, *Essai*, 100–08.

the *ahl al-ḥadīth*. If any pious believer could receive messages from God or the prophets, and if such messages could assume the apodictic authority of Ḥadīth, there could be little point in preserving the historically authenticated practice of the Prophet.

Despite his reputation in the *rijāl*-books for reliable transmission, Bishr appears to have narrated precisely the sort of “Ḥadīth” the scholars so vigorously deplored. In the *Hilya*, he relates a conversation between God and Moses. He also tells a story about the legendary ‘Awj b. ‘Unuq, who, he says, “would plunge into the sea, collect teak for firewood – he was the first to discover teak – pull a whale from the sea, and roast it in the eye of the sun.”⁹¹ (The point is that God provided for ‘Awj even though he was a pagan.) Five members of Bishr’s “generation,” including his associate al-Fuḍayl, reportedly disseminated similarly dubious Ḥadīth.⁹² Later Ḥadīth-minded biographers, while respectful of Bishr, appear to have concluded that he cannot have been a reliable transmitter.⁹³ Al-Dhahabī, for example, declares that Bishr did not know Arabic properly. He also reproduces the ‘Awj-story without comment, evidently on the assumption that it would speak for itself and demonstrate Bishr’s unreliability as a transmitter.⁹⁴

The polemic continued on the Sufi side as well, where it was, if anything, even harsher. The most direct expression of it occurs in a speech attributed to Bishr by al-Shaʿrānī (d. 973/1565): “O evil scholars! You are the heirs of the prophets! They bequeathed their knowledge to you, but you have weaselled out of living by it. Instead you have made your learning into a trade to support yourselves. Aren’t you afraid to be the first into Hell?”⁹⁵ This declaration, though undoubtedly spurious, summarizes an entire history of contention. “Evil scholars” was the term al-Subkī applied to the Muʿtazilīs he blamed for the Inquisition.⁹⁶ The implication here is that the Ḥadīth-men have renounced their role as exemplars and admonishers in return for worldly favor. Strikingly, however, Bishr (or a transmitter) still addresses them as the heirs of the prophets. Had he no hope for them at all, he would presumably not trouble himself to warn them.

Bishr’s fame

In the *Kitāb al-waraʿ*, al-Marrūdhī reports having seen Bishr walking on a water-channel. When Ibn Ḥanbal expressed his disapproval, al-Marrūdhī explained that Bishr was only trying to escape the crowd that had gathered to look at him.⁹⁷ Given that the point of the discussion is the permissibility of

⁹¹ *HA*, VIII: 350–51. ⁹² Massignon, *Essai*, 107–8.

⁹³ Bishr’s fate here parallels that of other early renunciants, who gradually disappeared from the *rijāl*-books (Melchert, “Early Ascetics”). ⁹⁴ *SAN*, XI: 470–72.

⁹⁵ Shaʿrānī, *Ṭabaqāt*, I: 63. ⁹⁶ Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, II: 56–59.

⁹⁷ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Waraʿ*, 31. The channels (*abbārāt*) are described as carrying water from a raising device (*saqya*) into wells or cisterns. If they passed through walls, they would have made convenient escape routes. Ibn Ḥanbal may have disapproved of walking on them because doing so would stir up sediment and cloud the water (I thank Stephen Hughey for his help on this point).

walking on the channels, this passing reference confirms the Sufi biographers' insistence that Bishr was spectacularly famous. In the *Hilya*, we are told that parents brought their children to him for blessings. Once, he gave a *dāniq* (a sixth of a dirham) to a beggar; a seeker of *baraka* then accosted the beggar and offered to buy Bishr's *dāniq* for ten dirhams.⁹⁸ As in the case of Ibn Ḥanbal, people evidently imagined him capable of miracles. One day, we are told, a suspicious merchant spied him buying bread, roast meat, and sweets. When he left the market, the merchant followed, hoping to catch him in an act of gluttony and expose him as a hypocrite. Bishr walked to a village, where he gave the delicacies to a man who was lying ill in a mosque. Disappointed, the merchant went for a stroll around the village, and returned to find Bishr gone. The sick man told him that Bishr had returned to Baghdad, which the merchant then discovered was some 160 miles away. The merchant had to wait a week for him to return on another errand of mercy, at which time the irritated renunciant conveyed him back to Baghdad in a single afternoon of walking. The merchant repented and became a Sufi.⁹⁹

Other reports in the *Hilya* depict Bishr in less spectacular circumstances, and imply that his fame was due less to a reputation for thaumaturgy than to his conspicuous austerity. One eyewitness recalls:

One very cold morning, my brother and I went to see Bishr. We found him at the door of his house, with Khafīl al-Khayyāt. He rose, and we followed him. He was wearing a ragged fur coat and short ankle-boots. He went out to the market in a very thin loin-cloth. Whenever he passed a single man or a group of people, he would always call out out in a loud voice: "Peace be upon you!" When he reached the market, he stopped to ask a flour-seller yesterday's price. "Good news for you, Abū Naṣr," said the man, "it's gone down." [Bishr] praised God and took [some flour].¹⁰⁰

Although Bishr reportedly disapproved of making a show of asceticism, this report has him emerge on a cold day in thin and ragged clothing. Van Ess has suggested that such conspicuous destitution amounted to an expression of solidarity with the urban poor, specifically the irregular laborers and the *'ayyārūn*.¹⁰¹ Certainly Bishr was penniless: "I've been craving roast meat for forty years," al-Sulamī quotes him as saying, "but I've never had even a dirham to buy any." Moreover, he thought hunger a virtue: "He who tosses and turns in hunger is as worthy of heaven as the martyr who writhes in his own blood." He even had a good word to say about the criminal classes: "I love a generous bandit (*shāṭir*) more than a miserly Qur'ān-reader."¹⁰² Yet the biographies treat these dicta as spiritual counsel, not expressions of class resentment. Admittedly, Bishr could plausibly represent opposition to the established order. As a proto-Sunni, he (like his fellow Marwazī Ibn Ḥanbal) regarded the *khalq al-Qur'ān* as heresy, and disapproved of the Inquisition. As a

⁹⁸ *HA*, VIII: 347–48. ⁹⁹ *HA*, VIII: 353. ¹⁰⁰ *HA*, VIII: 340. ¹⁰¹ *ThG*, III: 106.

¹⁰² Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 41–45. Cf. *HA*, VIII: 347: "If you're worried by high prices, think of death, and you'll stop worrying about the prices."

descendant of the first Khurasani *abnā'*, moreover, he (like the *'ayyārūn*) might have resented al-Ma'mūn's second *da'wa*, the siege of Baghdad, and the killing of al-Amīn. Even so, he reportedly refused to stand up for Ibn Ḥanbal during the Inquisition (see further below).

Ironically enough for a man who had been promised fame, Bishr regarded it as a calamity. "The man who wants people to know him," he said, "will never taste the sweetness of the next world."¹⁰³ "Whoever deals with God truthfully," he added, "will shun other people." When he could not shun them, he refused to speak with them. One witness reports: "I visited Bishr b. al-Ḥārith and sat with him a while, and all he would say was, 'Whoever loves fame fears not God.'"¹⁰⁴ In a letter to his uncle, he declared:

Know, 'Alī, that the one who suffers fame and notoriety suffers a great calamity indeed. May God cause us to bear it with the modest and humble self-abasement before His Greatness; may he guard us from its temptations and evil consequences, as He does in the case of his *awliyā'* and of those whom He wishes to guide. Turn in upon the nearest thing to yourself – that is, to the gaining of God's favor; and, whatever you do, do not let your heart seek the approval or fear the censure of your contemporaries.¹⁰⁵

Here, perhaps, is another part of the explanation for Bishr's withdrawal from Ḥadīth-circles. Public teaching exposed one to the judgement of students and fellow transmitters, and could tempt the believer to concern himself with his own reputation. As happened to Ibn Ḥanbal, however, Bishr's avoidance of fame only made his reputation grow, and subjected him to even greater misery. Biographers evidently delighted in the paradox, and adduced numerous stories of confrontation between him and his admirers, or between him and God. According to one witness, Bishr was appalled to learn that children were afraid of him:

One Friday, Bishr and I left the congregational mosque and passed through the alley of Abū al-Layth, where some children were playing with *jawz* [walnuts or perhaps coconuts]. When they saw him they cried "Bishr! Bishr!" snatched up their *jawz* and scampered away. He stood still a moment, then said: "What heart could bear such a thing? I shall never set foot in this alley again until I meet my Maker!"¹⁰⁶

According to the later tradition, he was no better pleased with the good opinion of adults. Al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1073) reports that Bishr once overheard a man remark of him that "he refrains from sleeping all night long, and breaks his fast only every three days." He burst into tears, saying: "I cannot recall ever staying up all night, nor fasting for a day without eating in the evening. But God Almighty in His grace and generosity has people give a believer more credit than he deserves."¹⁰⁷

Several reports postulate that even death could not break the vicious circle of fame and obscurity. In a posthumous dream-vision, Bishr reported that

¹⁰³ *HA*, VIII: 343.

¹⁰⁴ *HA*, VIII: 347, 346.

¹⁰⁵ *HA*, VII: 342.

¹⁰⁶ *TB* VII: 80 (no. 3517); Jarrar, "Biṣr," 228–29.

¹⁰⁷ Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 18.

God forgave him but opened for him only half of Heaven. The reason was that he was insufficiently grateful for having been adored: “You could prostrate yourself on hot coals,” God told him, “and still not thank Me enough for the [reverence] for you that I have placed in the hearts of My creatures.”¹⁰⁸ Another dreamer reports that Bishr continued to practice renunciation even in the afterlife: asked about conditions in Paradise, he replied that he missed his crust of bread.¹⁰⁹ This odd story, like the legend of Rābi‘a al-‘Adawīya (d. 185/801–802?), who reportedly carried a torch to burn Paradise to the ground,¹¹⁰ offers a literary response to a characteristically Sufi problem: how to reconcile *zuhd* on earth with the indulgence believers are promised in the afterlife. Evidently, Bishr’s famous asceticism made him an appealing mouthpiece for transmitters tempted to speculate about such matters. Strikingly, however, even these later legends preserve a memory of the ascetical nature of his piety. Unlike the mystics, Bishr insists on the great gulf between man and God, even in Heaven.

Bishr’s barefootedness

The most famous manifestation of Bishr’s *zuhd* was his reported aversion to wearing shoes. The first extant reference to him as al-Ḥāfī, “the barefoot,” appears in the *Ma‘ārif* of Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889).¹¹¹ Abū Nu‘aym’s *Ḥilya* reports that the bottoms of Bishr’s feet “had turned black from the dirt of his walking barefoot.”¹¹² Jarrar, who has carried out an exhaustive study of the theme, credits the first explanation of Bishr’s discalcity to a report by Abū ‘Alī al-Fadakī (d. 427/1055) cited in the *Ansāb* of al-Sam‘ānī (d. 562/1197). “He was nicknamed al-Ḥāfī because he went to a cobbler to ask for a strap for one of his sandals [when the old one] broke. The cobbler said, ‘What a burden all of you are to people!’ So [Bishr] flung the one sandal from his hand and the other from his foot, and swore never to wear them again.”¹¹³ This report implies that ascetics were in the habit of begging services from tradesmen, and that Bishr renounced shoes so as to stop being a nuisance.

Later biographers, particularly those who wrote in Persian, insisted on ascribing mystical significance to Bishr’s barefootedness. In his *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, al-Hujwīrī (d. 465/1072) says that Bishr was so intensely absorbed in the contemplation of God that he never put anything on his feet. Asked the reason for his discalcity, he replied that the Earth is God’s carpet (cf. Qur’ān 71: 19), and it is wrong to tread on it while wearing shoes. “A shoe,” adds al-Hujwīrī, “seemed to him a veil between him and God.”¹¹⁴ ‘Aṭṭār (d. 617/1220) adopts a different premise, namely, that Bishr happened to be barefoot when

¹⁰⁸ *HA*, VIII: 336. ¹⁰⁹ *TB*, VII: 83 (no. 3517). ¹¹⁰ Smith, *Rābi‘a*, 98.

¹¹¹ Ibn Qutayba, *Ma‘ārif*, 525.

¹¹² *HA*, VIII: 347. At VIII: 340 he is described as wearing boots; cf. Jarrar, “Bišr,” 203.

¹¹³ Sam‘ānī, *Ansāb*, IV: 26; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, I: 275; Jarrar, “Bišr,” 199–200.

¹¹⁴ Hujwīrī, “*Kashf*” (tr. Nicholson), 105.

he repented, and so chose to remain in that state. ‘Aṭṭār’s Persian account begins when Bishr picks up the paper with God’s name on it. The dream-message from God is vouchsafed to a holy man (*bozorg*), who seeks out Bishr and finds him drinking with friends. Told of God’s message for him, he tearfully bids his friends farewell. “Then, still distracted, bareheaded and barefoot, he went out and repented.”¹¹⁵ A similar story appears in the Arabic *Kitāb al-tawwābīn* by ‘Aṭṭār’s contemporary Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī (d. 620/1223).¹¹⁶ The later tradition’s eagerness to assign meaning to the story is also evident from the commentaries on al-Qushayrī’s *Risāla*. Al-Qushayrī recounts that Bishr knocked on the door of a friend’s house and identified himself as “the barefoot.” From inside a little girl called out: “If you would buy a pair of sandals for two *dāniqs* no one would call you ‘barefoot’ any more.” According to al-Qushayrī, Bishr himself was heard to recount this tale.¹¹⁷ In his commentary, Zakariyā’ al-Anṣārī (d. 926/1520) remarks that “Bishr took the incident as a lesson, which is why people transmitted the story on his authority.” Al-Anṣārī’s commentator Muṣṭafā al-‘Arūsī (d. 1293/1876) adds that Bishr recounted the incident frequently because it was one of many *zawājir* or “divine rebukes” that mark the transition to progressively higher spiritual states.¹¹⁸

The late appearance and subsequent expansion of the barefootedness-theme makes it difficult to grant credence to any particular version of it. Fritz Meier, though he concedes that the claims of the later biographers are “mere theory,” has the disconcerting mannerism of attributing the claims to Bishr himself. After citing the report about the cobbler, for example, he states that Bishr “later” justified not wearing shoes by referring to Qur’ān 71: 19.¹¹⁹ The “carpet of God” explanation indeed appears later in the tradition than the cobbler-story, but this does not mean that Bishr himself cited it later in his career. Even Jarrar, who is well aware of the literary nature of the sources, credits Bishr with a conversion that persuaded him to walk barefoot, and treats later explanations like Hujwīrī’s as historically credible.¹²⁰ More likely, however, the later biographers are merely responding to the Sufi tradition’s invitation to exegesis. This invitation arises, in turn, from the tradition’s self-proclaimed role as interpreter of the esoteric.

Not all believers could be expected to agree that the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth require some sort of supplementation in order to serve as guideposts to salvation. Even if one concedes to Abū Nu‘aym that a stringent orthopraxy somehow equals or results in Sufism, one still cannot assert – in fact, one is all

¹¹⁵ ‘Aṭṭār, *Tadhkira*, I: 107. The biographer adds that certain anchorites would never spit on the ground or clean themselves with gravel because they saw a divine essence in all things. Enlightened persons see God’s light everywhere, as in the case of the Prophet, who walked on tiptoe to avoid stepping on angels which only he could see.

¹¹⁶ Ibn Qudāma, *Tawwābīn*, 201–02; cited in Jarrar, “Biṣr,” 197–98.

¹¹⁷ Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 19. Bishr indeed tells the tale himself in Ibn ‘Asākir, *Ta’rīkh kabīr*, VII: 230.

¹¹⁸ Anṣārī, *Sharḥ*, I: 92; ‘Arūsī, *Natā’ij* (on margin). ¹¹⁹ Meier, “Bishr.”

¹²⁰ Jarrar, “Biṣr,” 227.

the less justified in asserting – that exoteric Islam is insufficient unless supplemented by some independent body of secret gnosis or covert practice. The disputed necessity of Sufism explains why it so often takes the form of hints, allusions, and metaphors, and not of positive doctrine. If the Sufis accept the exoteric meanings of Islam, as al-Sarrāj says they do, any positive doctrine they claimed to possess above and beyond the exoterica would likely have to be superfluous or redundant. One Sufi solution to this dilemma consists in rarely propounding specific doctrines but instead hinting and gesturing at some secret truth which members of the *tāʾifa* alone possess. Such an attitude in turn fosters a sort of hermeneutic excess which – in its biographical manifestation – encourages attempts to find new layers of meaning in every act and utterance of those individuals designated as exemplary Sufis.¹²¹

Doubtless the unlikely literary figure to have joined the ranks of Bishr's interpreters is the German dramatist Gotthold Lessing. In *Nathan der Weise*, Lessing's 1779 drama of religious toleration, Bishr turns up in the guise of a dervish called Al-Hafi. Lessing may have heard the name from Johann Jakob Reiske, the Latin translator of Abū 'l-Fidā, or perhaps come across it in d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale*.¹²² Set in twelfth-century Jerusalem, the play casts Al-Hafi in the unlikely role of dervish, chessmaster, and treasurer to Saladin. Although Al-Hafi bears little resemblance to his namesake, he does make a speech that could serve as a defense of the latter's Sufi biographers. In Act I, Al-Hafi comes to call upon his friend Nathan the Jew, who is surprised to see him wearing the sumptuous robes of the treasurer's office. Nathan exclaims: "Is it you, or is it not? A dervish in such attire!" Al-Hafi protests: "Well, why not? Can one make nothing at all out of a dervish?"¹²³ As the history of his biographies demonstrates, Bishr al-Hāfi's admirers were able to make a great deal of him indeed.

Bishr's sisters

According to al-Sulamī, Bishr had three sisters, Muḍgha, Mukhkha, and Zubda. When Muḍgha died, "Bishr was most painfully afflicted and wept a great deal." When this was remarked upon, he said: "I read in some book or other that when a believer falls short in his service to his Lord, God deprives

¹²¹ Amedroz finds the slippery referentiality of Sufi discourse irritating ("Notes," 551–54). While his irony makes for a refreshing change from the effusions of those enthusiasts who take Sufi discourse at face value, it falls short of making the point intended here, namely, that a reluctance to refer to anything in particular confers an ability to refer – or appear to refer – to anything at all; and furthermore that this and related paradoxes may be considered evidence not of philosophical incoherence but of the inexpressibility of some higher truth. These are literary achievements of no small proportions. They allow us, for example, to make a Sufi of Amedroz himself: we have only to state that he belittles the Sufis in order to conceal his own affiliation with them and to avoid the reputation of sanctity. This sort of narratizing can be applied to any discourse, and cannot be successfully contradicted.

¹²² Meier, "Bishr," I: 1246.

¹²³ Lessing, *Werke*, I: 523. I adopt with some changes the translation in Lessing, *Nathan*, 15.

him of his companion; and she was my companion in this world.”¹²⁴ The second sister, Mukhkha, had a reputation for scrupulosity – great enough, in fact, to earn her a place in the Ḥanbalī tradition. According to the reports in Ibn al-Farrā’s *Ṭabaqāt*, she visited the imam to ask him about some matters of *fiqh*. The story captured the attention of Ḥanbalī as well as Sufi biographers, who recount several versions of it. In what appears to be the oldest version, the imam’s son Abd Allāh reports:

Mukhkha, the sister of Bishr b. al-Ḥārith, came to see my father. She said: “I am a woman with two *dāniqs* of capital. I buy cotton, spin it, sell it for half a dirham, and make it through the week on one *dāniq*. [But one night] Ṭāhir’s son [i.e., ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn] came patrolling with a torch, and as he stood talking to the street patrol, I spun several lengths by the light of his torch before it vanished. Now I know that God will ask me [about this], so solve this problem for me, and may God save you!” He replied: “Put your two *dāniqs* [for this week] aside, and live without any capital until God provides for you.” [Later] I asked my father, “Dad, why didn’t you just tell her to put aside what she earned from the lengths [that she spun by the torchlight]?” He said, “Son, her question did not admit of hairsplitting (*ta’wīl*).” Then he asked me who she was. I told him that she was Bishr’s sister Mukhkha, and he said: “I’ve met my match right here [?].”¹²⁵

Mukhkha needed the imam’s advice for two reasons. First, using anything without permission was a violation of *summa*.¹²⁶ Second, light provided by a suspect source – in this case, the city authorities – was itself a major source of ritual pollution.¹²⁷ Ḥanbalī narrators, evidently impressed with this story, retold it for greater effect. In a second version, the woman is not identified at first. She asks a different version of the spinning-question, and then a question about whether the moaning of a sick person constitutes a complaint. Declaring later that he has never heard anyone ask about such things, Ibn Ḥanbal sends his son to follow her home and discover who she is. Learning her identity, the imam exclaims: “Such a woman could only be the sister of Bishr!”¹²⁸

Abū Nu‘aym’s *Ḥilya* retells the tale of Mukhkha’s visit. Oddly, however, it also contains a report in which one of Bishr’s sisters thwarts his pursuit of exceptional scrupulosity. Bishr comes home one day to find a meal of bread and fish, and asks his sister about it. She explains that their deceased mother had appeared to her in a dream and told her that he had a craving for fish. He weeps but refuses the food: “I have been craving it for twenty-five years, but God would not approve of my returning to something I gave up for his sake.”¹²⁹ Two reports in al-Khaṭīb’s *Ta’rīkh* make a similar point. In one,

¹²⁴ Cited in Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣiḥāḥ*, II: 294; also Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, I: 276.

¹²⁵ *ṬH*, I: 427. Ibn Ḥanbal’s final remark is *min hāhunā uṭṭu*, which is not entirely clear to me.

¹²⁶ One Abū Bakr b. Abī ‘Āṣim reportedly copied 50,000 Ḥadīth by the light of a grocer’s lamp; when he remembered he had not asked the grocer’s permission, he washed his books clean and rewrote the Ḥadīth (Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām* XXI: 75; I thank Christopher Melchert for this reference). ¹²⁷ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Wara’*, 104; see further above, pp. 133–34.

¹²⁸ *ṬH*, I: 427–28. ¹²⁹ *ḤA*, VIII: 353.

Bishr's sister (still unidentified) has him bring her yarn so she can mend his waistcoat. But when he weighs the yarn and discovers that she is preparing to make the garment bigger (or thicker), he says "Now that you've ruined it, just keep it." In the second account, she complains of not having any meat on a feast day. Bishr goes out and returns with a piece of meat, but refuses to consume anything but the salt water used to prepare it.¹³⁰ In all these cases, Bishr's sister, despite her good intentions, endangers his *waraʿ*. For this very reason, however, she can offer firsthand testimony about it. Apocryphal or otherwise, the stories at least have a plausible narrator – albeit an anonymous one who leaves rather a different impression than the Mukhkha of the Ḥanbalī sources.

In Ibn al-Jawzī's *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa*, a work that represents a compromise between the Ḥanbalī and Sufī traditions, it is the Mukhkha of the Ḥanbalī sources who comes to the fore. As we have seen, Ibn al-Jawzī begins the *Ṣifa* with a critique of Abū Nuʿaym's errors as a biographer.¹³¹ Among these errors is his deficient coverage of women. "Given the inferiority of females," says Ibn al-Jawzī, "the mention of pious women (*ʿābidāt*) should spur the indolent man to action." By way of precedent, he notes that Sufyān al-Thawrī "derived benefit from Rābiʿa, and modelled his behavior in accordance with her sayings."¹³² True to his word, Ibn al-Jawzī includes several entries on pious women, including Bishr's sisters. Their entry omits the reports of their interference, declaring rather that Bishr learned scrupulosity from one of them. It also contains the different accounts of Mukhkha's visit, including one taken over from Abū Nuʿaym in which Ibn Ḥanbal's answer is not even reported. Instead he is merely made to exclaim: "O family of Bishr! May I never be deprived of you! I always hear the purest scrupulosity from you!"¹³³

The omission of Ibn Ḥanbal's answer to the question, and the elaboration of his final remarks, suggest that the story appealed to transmitters first and foremost because it illustrated the commonality of sentiment that existed between Bishr and Ibn Ḥanbal, as well as the awkwardness that arose from their presence together in Baghdad. Mukhkha and her brother shared Ibn Ḥanbal's preoccupation with scrupulosity and his disapproval of the state. At the same time, Mukhkha's visit amounts to an admission that Bishr was not qualified to judge fine points of *waraʿ*. Were he able to do so, she would not need to ask the imam. But why did Bishr not ask the imam himself? As we know from the Ḥanbalī sources, the two never met. Although they agreed on a great many things, the remaining differences may have made a face-to-face meeting too awkward a prospect – for biographers, certainly, and perhaps for the two exemplars as well. By her visit, Mukhkha saves her brother from having to defer in person to Ibn Ḥanbal's authority. Yet the report does not make an unambiguous affirmation of the imam's superiority. Rather, it ends with his praise for the piety of Bishr's household. The importance of this

¹³⁰ *TB*, VII: 77 and 78 (no. 3517). ¹³¹ See above, pp. 146–47.

¹³² Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifa*, I: 6. ¹³³ *Ibid.*, II: 294–96.

remark is evident from its progressive elaboration in the sources. Mukhkha and Bishr concede the imam's authority in *fiqh*, while he makes a corresponding gesture of deference by admiring their piety. Apart from the historicity of Mukhkha's visit, the recurrent stories about it suggest that later representatives of the Ḥanbalī and Sufi *tā'ifas* approved of its implications.

Bishr and Ibn Ḥanbal

The Mukhkha-stories illustrate the delicacy that transmitters and biographers felt obliged to exercise when dealing with the relationship between Bishr and Ibn Ḥanbal. Both men exemplified somber piety and rigorous austerity. Yet their respective claims to authority were quite different. Ibn Ḥanbal drew his strength from rigorous adherence to the example of the Prophet as transmitted in Ḥadīth. Bishr, on the other hand, abandoned Ḥadīth-study for a life of solitude and self-examination. Given the similarities as well as the differences between the two men, their opinions of one another could easily function as evidence for or against later notions of the proper relationship between their respective *tā'ifas*. Although some reports favor one man over the other, most, like Mukhkha's, succeed in balancing their respective claims and in emphasizing their solidarity against a third *tā'ifa*, that of the caliphs.¹³⁴

The early biographical sources corroborate the impression that both men were regarded as exemplars of scrupulosity by their contemporaries. In the introduction to the *Ta'rikh Baghdād*, al-Khaṭīb notes that scholars who consider the Baghdad region to be usurped land (*dār ghaṣb*) forbid buying and selling lots there. One witness then relates that his mother wanted to sell a house she had inherited. "She said to me, 'Son, go to Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr b. al-Ḥārith and ask them about it, because I do not like making decisions they might disapprove of.'" According to the son's report, both men agreed that the house could be sold but not the lot.¹³⁵ It is odd to find Bishr sought out for legal judgements; his biographers do not credit him with delivering any. Evidently, his reputation for sanctity qualified him to speak even on such fundamental matters as the disposition of property in the city. Significantly, his decision was the same as Ibn Ḥanbal's. Whatever their differences, the two men agreed, or were thought to agree, on the meaning of the law.

Besides being admired by their contemporaries, the two men reportedly admired each other. In the *Kitāb al-wara'*, as we have seen, Bishr's name crops up in discussions of proper conduct in various circumstances. Ibn Ḥanbal reportedly praised Bishr's refusal to eat the produce of the Sawād, and applauded his spitting out a suspicious date.¹³⁶ In the *Ta'rikh Baghdād*, the

¹³⁴ In an earlier study of this relationship (Cooperson, "Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr al-Ḥāfi"), I overestimated the extent to which Bishr's proto-Sunni asceticism was obscured by Sufi revisionism. Having read Melchert's "Transition," I should have known better. The present chapter endeavors to redress this deficiency. ¹³⁵ *TB*, I: 34 (= old ed. I: 4).

¹³⁶ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Wara'*, 84–87.

imam praises him even more warmly, calling him “the fourth of the seven *abdāl*” and “one without peer in the community.” Like a man who can sit on the blade of a spear, Bishr “has left no room for another to occupy.” The day Bishr died, the imam exclaimed that the thought of him had given him a sense of companionship (*la-qad kāna fī dhikrihi uns*). He then put on his cloak and braved the heat to march in Bishr’s funeral.¹³⁷ In biographical entries devoted to Ibn Ḥanbal, we find Bishr expressing reciprocal admiration. In Abū Nu‘aym’s *Ḥilya*, for example, a witness recalls asking Bishr what softens the heart. Bishr replied that the “remembrance of God” (Qur’ān 13: 28) would do so. He was then told that Ibn Ḥanbal had responded differently, giving “permitted foods” as the answer. Bishr declared this response the better one: the imam, he admitted, had “gotten to the heart of the matter.”¹³⁸ Elsewhere he declares flatly: “Who am I compared to [Ibn Ḥanbal]? He is more learned than I!”¹³⁹

In counterpoint to these reports of mutual admiration, the biographical sources also contain evidence that each man and his respective followers harbored certain reservations about the other. After praising Bishr’s scrupulosity about food, Ibn Ḥanbal noted that he too could avoid consuming Sawādī produce if he were unmarried and childless.¹⁴⁰ He also disapproved of Bishr’s opinion that one could remove a potentially tainted coin from a sum of money and spend the rest, calling it “the view of the advocates of *ra’y*.”¹⁴¹ Elsewhere he says of Bishr: “If he had married, his career would have been perfect.”¹⁴² In the *Ḥilya*, Ibn Ḥanbal’s son remarks that his father shunned society more resolutely than Bishr:

My father traveled to Ṭarsūs on foot; and to Yemen on foot; and performed five pilgrimages, three on foot; and no one in any of those places can claim to have seen him except when he came out for Friday prayer. He bore solitude better than anyone. Even Bishr, for all his [spiritual attainment], could not bear solitude for long; he would go out visiting an hour here, an hour there.¹⁴³

Significantly, however, Ibn Ḥanbal did not criticize Bishr because he deemed him a Sufi. On the basis of Bishr’s condemnation of the Ḥadīth-men, Louis Massignon suggests that Bishr, like al-Muḥāsibī, must have entered into conflict with Ibn Ḥanbal. However, al-Muḥāsibī was a *mutakallim* while Bishr was not, and it was al-Muḥāsibī’s *kalām* that Ibn Ḥanbal objected to.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, neither Bishr nor al-Muḥāsibī appears to have called himself a Sufi.¹⁴⁵ For his part, Ibn Ḥanbal was aware of Sufis, or at least of one person who identified himself as such. This was Abū Ḥamza Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Šūfī (d. 269/882–83), who reportedly “sat with” both him and Bishr. Abū Ḥamza himself relates that when he attended the imam’s circle, the latter would ask

¹³⁷ *TB* VII: 81–82 (no. 3517); cf. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Wara’*, 70. ¹³⁸ *HA*, IX: 182.

¹³⁹ *ManIH*, 119. ¹⁴⁰ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Wara’*, 87. ¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁴² *TB*, VII: 76 (no. 3517). ¹⁴³ *HA*, IX: 183.

¹⁴⁴ Massignon, *Essai*, 208–9; cf. van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, 113–15. Melchert (“Ḥanābila,” 7, n. 20) has also stressed this point. ¹⁴⁵ For al-Muḥāsibī see van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, 6.

(with apparent sarcasm) “What do you say about it, Sufi?”¹⁴⁶ As Melchert has shown, Ibn Ḥanbal was hostile to such Sufi practices as lone wandering and private worship. Admittedly, several of al-Sulamī’s “Sufis” appear in Ibn al-Farrā’s *Ṭabaqāt*, the major compilation of Ḥanbalī biographies. However, the imam himself had only tangential connections with them;¹⁴⁷ and of those who were ascetics rather than mystics, he reportedly approved. When an unnamed man belittled the ascetic Maʿrūf al-Karkhī, Ibn Ḥanbal declared: “Could one wish for any *ʿilm* beyond what Maʿrūf has achieved?”¹⁴⁸ Despite his good relationship with the imam, Bishr himself does not have an entry in the *Ṭabaqāt*. However, this omission appears due only to the literal-mindedness of Ibn al-Farrā’, who included in the first *ṭabaqa* only those who had actually met Ibn Ḥanbal. Thus Mukhkha, who asked the imam a question, has an entry. There she recounts some of Bishr’s reflections on divine favor, remarks which Ibn al-Farrā’ saw fit to include.¹⁴⁹

For his part, Bishr, by virtue of his complaints about Ḥadīth-scholars, would appear to have been critical of Ibn Ḥanbal, if only by implication. He reportedly averred that even a man as renowned as Sufyān al-Thawrī or al-Muʿāfā b. ʿImran would fall in his opinion should he recite Ḥadīth.¹⁵⁰ Although he never criticized Ibn Ḥanbal by name, he does appear to have expressed disapproval of him on one occasion. One ʿAbbās b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīm al-Anbārī reports that he was attending one of the imam’s Ḥadīth-sessions when someone mentioned a Ḥadīth of ʿIsā b. Yūnus:

“‘Isā b. Yūnus never transmitted that Ḥadīth,” said Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal. Then he said, “God forgive me! [I should say] I don’t know whether the transmission of that Ḥadīth on the authority of ʿIsā b. Yūnus is correct.” Then he said, “God forgive me! It is known only by Bishr b. al-Ḥārith.”

Said ʿAbbās: I said, “I won’t find any way of seeing Bishr except by means of this Ḥadīth.” So I went to see him and told him the story and told him what Aḥmad had said.

“May God grant me health!” he said twice. “This is a calamity and a tribulation: a Ḥadīth is mentioned, and it is said that it is correct only on the authority of one man!”

[ʿAbbās] said, “I was thinking to myself: How different the two men are!”¹⁵¹

According to this report, Ibn Ḥanbal deemed Bishr a reliable source of Ḥadīth. Bishr, in turn, was evidently willing to grant admission to a visitor who could mention Ibn Ḥanbal’s name. But instead of seconding the imam’s concern for establishing correct transmission, the ascetic only deplores a situation in which a Ḥadīth should have such precarious authority. He may also be appalled at the notion that he should be called upon to judge the character of Ibn Yūnus.¹⁵²

If their disagreements about Ḥadīth-study set Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr apart, their shared disapproval of the Inquisition brought them together. As a proto-

¹⁴⁶ *TH*, I: 268; cited in Melchert, “Hanābila,” 5. ¹⁴⁷ Melchert, “Hanābila,” 4–9.

¹⁴⁸ *TB*, XIII: 202 (no. 7177). ¹⁴⁹ *TH*, I: 28. ¹⁵⁰ *TB*, VII: 74 (no. 3517).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7: 80. ¹⁵² Cf. Melchert, “Early Ascetics,” 10.

Sunni, and perhaps particularly as a Marwazī,¹⁵³ Bishr condemned the *miḥna*. Regarding the scholars who had capitulated, he declared that “they should have let their hair be soaked with blood rather than give in.”¹⁵⁴ A later report has him explain that Ibn Ḥanbal was asked to copy the sentence “God is the Lord of the Qur’ān” but refused. “If he had,” says Bishr, “he would have given them what they wanted.”¹⁵⁵ According to the imam’s biographies, Bishr spoke approvingly of Ibn Ḥanbal’s fortitude under the lash, comparing him to gold forged in the furnace of the Inquisition.¹⁵⁶ Informed of this remark, Ibn Ḥanbal reportedly declared: “Praise God Who has caused our deed to gratify Bishr.”¹⁵⁷ Ironically, it was the *miḥna* that eventually brought Ibn Ḥanbal around to Bishr’s view of Ḥadīth-transmission. During the reign of al-Wāthiq, Ibn Ḥanbal was forbidden to teach; later, under al-Mutawakkil, he was offered the post of tutor to the caliph’s son. In exasperation, he vowed to stop transmitting altogether. Later, he declared that he had only known peace since he made his vow. “The right way,” he concluded, “is that of Bishr al-Hārith,” who had also renounced the teaching of Ḥadīth.¹⁵⁸

Despite Ibn Ḥanbal’s expressions of approval, Bishr reportedly rued his failure to assist him during the crisis. Hanbalī biographers, notably Ibn al-Jawzī, seized on these reports, evidently because they amounted to an admission of Ibn Ḥanbal’s superiority. In the *Manāqib*, Bishr proclaims: “How ugly my leg is without a fetter upon it in defense of [Ibn Ḥanbal]!”¹⁵⁹ Reportedly, too, he went to al-Mu‘taṣim’s palace on the day of the flogging and stood at the gate “like one distraught.” Inquiring anxiously whether the imam had capitulated, he offered to take his place if he had, and was relieved to learn he had not.¹⁶⁰ The most telling report in this connection is one cited, with slight variations, by Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, Ibn al-Farrā’, Ibn ‘Asākir, and Ibn al-Jawzī in their respective biographies of Ibn Ḥanbal. It states that while Ibn Ḥanbal was being flogged, or perhaps afterwards, Bishr was asked to make a public declaration of support for him. According to Abū Nu‘aym, he replied: “Are you commanding me to stand where the prophets stand?”¹⁶¹ Ibn al-Farrā’'s report has him say: “You want me to stand where the prophets stand, but I cannot.”¹⁶² In Ibn ‘Asākir’s version, Bishr adds that his body is not strong enough to stand “on a level with the prophets.”¹⁶³ In one of the several variants cited by Ibn al-Jawzī, Bishr finally spells out his meaning: “Ibn Ḥanbal has stood where the prophets stand!”¹⁶⁴ Bishr is evidently referring to Moses’ defiance of Pharaoh, an example he claims he is too weak to follow.

¹⁵³ *ThG*, III: 448–49. ¹⁵⁴ *SAN*, XI: 323.

¹⁵⁵ *SAN*, XI: 258. The family accounts do not say that Ibn Hanbal was asked to copy anything, nor do they mention this sentence. But cf. Jāḥiz, *Rasā’il*, III: 293ff.

¹⁵⁶ *HA*, 9: 170. ¹⁵⁷ *ManIH*, 117. ¹⁵⁸ *SAN*, XI: 258. ¹⁵⁹ *ManIH*, 117–19.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 336. ¹⁶¹ *HA*, IX: 170. ¹⁶² *TH*, I: 13.

¹⁶³ Ibn ‘Asākir, *Ta’rīkh kabīr*, I: 34. Cf. Ibn al-Jawzī’s comparison of Ibn Ḥanbal and the *fatā* Abū al-Haytham (above, pp. 139–41). Though reportedly a “hooligan” in his youth, Bishr here specifically disclaims a signal virtue of the *fatā*: a willingness to be flogged without flinching.

¹⁶⁴ *ManIH*, 117–18.

As a result, he admits in effect that Ibn Ḥanbal is a worthier heir of the Prophet. Even some ascetics agreed: Abū Nu‘aym cites the verdict of one Muḥammad b. Muṣ‘ab, called “the pious” (*al-‘ābid*), who said: “Any one lash that fell upon Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal for the sake of God is greater than [all] the days of Bishr b. al-Ḥārith.”¹⁶⁵

To settle the matter of which man was superior, or, better yet, to establish some sort of balance between them, transmitters and biographers resorted to the device of visionary dreams. Bilāl al-Khawwās, for example, reports that he saw al-Khiḍr in a dream and asked him his opinion of the two men. Al-Khiḍr replied that Bishr had left no one like himself behind when he died. This makes him superior to the imam, who was still alive in 227/842. The imam himself, according to al-Khiḍr, was a *ṣiddiq*, a Sufi term for the ascetic precursors of the *ṭā’ifa*.¹⁶⁶ This report evidently favors Bishr the “Sufi,” but does not neglect Ibn Ḥanbal. The same is true in reverse for Ḥanbalī dream-tales, which favor the scholar but reserve a place for the ascetic. One narrator reports:

When Ibn Ḥanbal died, I was deeply grieved. I went to sleep that night and saw him in a dream, swaggering as he walked. I said, “Abū ‘Abd Allāh! Why are you walking that way?”

He said, “This is the way servants walk in Heaven.”

I asked, “What did God do with you?”

“He forgave me,” he said, “and crowned me, and gave me sandals of gold, all because I said that the Qur’ān is the uncreated speech of God.”

I asked him, “What did God do with Bishr?”

He said, “Bravo for Bishr! I left him in the presence of the Almighty, before a laden table, with the Almighty facing him and saying, ‘Eat, you who never ate! Drink, you who never drank! Enjoy, you who have never known enjoyment!’” or words to that effect.¹⁶⁷

Significantly, even the dream-tales that express inter-*ṭā’ifa* cordiality continue to abide by the unspoken rule that the two exemplars should never appear together. As we have seen, transmitters were willing to fabricate reports of interchanges between al-Ma’mūn and ‘Alī al-Riḍā, or between Ibn Ḥanbal and al-Mu‘taṣim. Why not between Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr? First, there was no model for it. In life, the two exemplars evidently preferred not to broach the matter of who should defer to whom. And, given the protocol current among Ḥadīth-scholars, a display of deference on someone’s part would have been inevitable. For one of the two to leave his house and visit the other would have signaled deference: students customarily traveled to see their teachers, not the other way around. Although the one visited could then rise to show respect for his visitor, the subsequent interchange would have been fraught with so many pitfalls that both men apparently preferred to avoid the exercise altogether. Later transmitters, similarly, could not imagine such a meeting taking place without resulting in an awkward judgement in favor of one or the other man.

¹⁶⁵ *HA*, IX: 173. ¹⁶⁶ *HA*, IX: 191–92. For *ṣiddiq* see above, p. 61.

¹⁶⁷ *HA*, IX: 190; Kinberg, “Legitimation,” 63.

In later periods, any such judgement would have been particularly provocative because it would apply by extension to the two men's respective *tā'ifas*, the Ḥanbalī and the Sufi. Given the complex history of interconnection between the two, such a judgement would seem unnecessarily bellicose. Moreover, it would fly in the face of what appears to have been the consensus of influential theorists and biographers in both traditions: namely, that each *tā'ifa* had a distinct and indispensable function to serve in the community. In what seems to be an affirmation of this consensus, the sage and judicious al-Dhahabī declined to pronounce one man superior to the other. "Bishr is great," he concludes, "as Ibn Ḥanbal is great (*Bishr 'azīmu 'l-qadri ka-Aḥmad*). We do not know the weight of deeds, only God does."¹⁶⁸ Coming as it does in the tenth/fourteenth century, al-Dhahabī's conclusion may well be a rebuke to those of his predecessors who insisted on comparing the two exemplars.

There are two exceptions, both in some way fantastic, to the rule of quarantine between the two men. The first is an apocryphal tale of a meeting between the two, mediated, as in Mukhkha's story, by a woman. The mystic Āmina al-Ramlīya has come to visit the ailing Bishr, and when Ibn Ḥanbal arrives on the same errand, she prays for them both. Later an anonymous note informs Ibn Ḥanbal that her prayer has been answered.¹⁶⁹ Notice that the imam's visit to Bishr can be justified as a charitable act and not as arising in the first instance from his reverence for Bishr. Notice also that Bishr, being ill, cannot be expected to rise, meaning that we cannot know whether he would have. In its studious avoidance of these narrative pitfalls, the anecdote affirms rather than mitigates the awkwardness attendant upon any depiction of face-to-face contact.

The second account of a meeting faces this awkwardness directly. Significantly, however, it appears in a biography of Ibn Ḥanbal, and even there in the form of a dream-vision. The narrator reports a dream in which he saw Bishr and Ma'rūf al-Karkhī sitting by the road. Asked what they were doing there, they replied that they were waiting for the "Commander of the Believers." The narrator reports his surprise that "the city's two ascetics" should be waiting to see the caliph. But when the procession appeared, the Commander of the Believers turned out to be Ibn Ḥanbal. Bishr leapt up and bent over as if to kiss him, but Ibn Ḥanbal said, "No, that's a non-Arab thing to do (*min fī 'l-al-a'ājim*)."¹⁷⁰ The two ascetics then asked the imam how he had achieved his high rank. He replied: "By my patience with these people," presumably meaning the great mass of believers.¹⁷¹ In the narrative negotiation of deference, this dream-tale clearly gives precedence to Ibn Ḥanbal, who receives the veneration of not one but two famous representatives of the Sufi

¹⁶⁸ SAN, XI: 201. ¹⁶⁹ Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rīkh kabīr*, II: 48.

¹⁷⁰ The *'ajam* who appeared in Iraq as a result of the second *da'wa* were seen as "unassimilated, half converted, or unconverted Iranians" (Crone, "Abbāsīd Abnā'," 14). Unlike Ibn Ḥanbal, Bishr had grown up in Marv, and could thus be described as *a'jam*. Even so, the description of his conduct here seems to be a figment of the transmitter's imagination.

¹⁷¹ Maqdisī, *Miḥna*, 140.

ṭāʾifa, and indeed rebukes Bishr for fawning over him. Yet it also calls Bishr and Maʾrūf “the two ascetics of Baghdad,” and sets them apart from the mass of believers with whom the imam must be “patient.” Most important, perhaps, it emphasizes that Ibn Ḥanbal, not al-Maʾmūn or al-Muʿtaṣim, is the “Commander of the Believers.” The two Sufis thus affirm that in the struggle among the Prophet’s heirs, they stand with Ibn Ḥanbal against the caliphs, even though such an alliance demands a substantial concession of authority to Ibn Ḥanbal.

Given the alliance of proto-Sunni scholars and ascetics against the *miḥna*-caliphs, the oddest testimony of all is that attributed to al-Maʾmūn. According to al-Sulamī, the caliph stated that “there is no one left in this town before whom one need be abashed except for that elder, Bishr b. al-Ḥārith.”¹⁷² Why would al-Maʾmūn have been “abashed” before Bishr? According to his own biographies, the caliph took a dim view of those ascetics who challenged him over points of *sunna*. Perhaps Bishr, who did not challenge him publicly, was a safe person for him to admire. Perhaps, too, the narrator of this report had an interest in making al-Maʾmūn appear deferential to an exemplar of the *sunna*. And in fact the narrator turns out to be Yahyā b. Aktham, a notorious source for stories constructed to apply a Sunni whitewashing to al-Maʾmūn.¹⁷³ Al-Khaṭīb, who made a signal contribution to this process, includes Yahyā’s report in his biography of Bishr.¹⁷⁴ For their part, Bishr’s Sufi biographers would have appreciated the story, especially if they felt obligated to defend him against accusations of passivity during the Inquisition.

Perhaps inspired by Yahyā’s report, the Sufi commentator al-Anṣārī (d. 926/1520) claims that Bishr attained such high standing that al-Maʾmūn decided to visit him. To pave the way, he asked Ibn Ḥanbal to persuade Bishr to agree. Ibn Ḥanbal, however, refused to intercede for the caliph, and the visit never took place.¹⁷⁵ This obviously apocryphal story shows that the complex realities of the third century had been almost completely forgotten, at least by the fabricator of this report. No longer historical individuals, Bishr, Ibn Ḥanbal, and al-Maʾmūn serve merely as representatives of their respective *ṭāʾifas*. As such, they can be reshuffled to make a self-congratulatory point in a late Sufi text. Even so, al-Anṣārī’s apocryphon does contain an echo, however faint, of the clamor of third-century Baghdad. Seven hundred years later, Ibn Ḥanbal still refuses to help al-Maʾmūn shore up his religious authority.

¹⁷² Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 40. The town in question is evidently Baghdad, not Marv. When al-Maʾmūn traveled to Marv on his father’s Khurasani campaign, Bishr was already some forty years old, and therefore doubtless already living in Iraq. Al-Maʾmūn’s Baghdad years correspond to the time when Bishr was in his early fifties or mid sixties, accounting perhaps for the caliph’s description of him as an “elder.” ¹⁷³ Above, pp. 55–56.

¹⁷⁴ *TB* VII: 75 (no. 3157). This version has a *yaʾnī* before Bishr’s name, making the name a gloss. Al-Maʾmūn could thus have been referring, originally, to someone else.

¹⁷⁵ Anṣārī, *Sharḥ*, I: 88.

Conclusions

The historical Bishr b. al-Ḥārith withdrew from an early career as a Ḥadīth-scholar to live in pious seclusion. His emphasis on asceticism and scrupulosity places him in the company of Fuḍayl b. 'Iyāḍ and other renunciants whose opinions were largely coincident with those of the emerging Ḥanbalī movement. The major difference between the *zuhhād* and the *ahl al-ḥadīth* was that the former rejected what they perceived as the empty learning and venality of the latter, as well as their willingness to impugn the character of believers in the name of *rijāl*-criticism. But because these issues were of concern to many Ḥadīth-men as well, they did not drive a wedge between the two wings of the *ahl al-sunna*. Bishr's criticism of Ḥadīth-scholarship was evidently acceptable: after all, he had tried it, and knew whereof he spoke. Moreover, his specific criticisms were not so different from those Ibn Ḥanbal himself could offer. Both men insisted that the point of Ḥadīth-study was to learn and apply the *sunna*, not to seek fame or make a living. This commonality of sentiment is evident from the Ḥanbalī sources, in which Bishr appears as a transmitter of Ḥadīth and an exemplar of *sunna*.

A century or so after Bishr's death, the mystics, now known as "Sufis," set out to write their own history. Theorists such as al-Sarrāj and biographers such as al-Sulamī, despite their awareness of the difference between asceticism and mysticism, declared Bishr and a number of his fellow ascetics to have been among the earliest Sufis. This predication, though anachronistic, was hardly arbitrary. Bishr's conspicuous piety linked him to a tradition of world-rejecting asceticism present since the beginnings of Islam, and to which the Sufis wished to affiliate themselves. In seeking to explain why her subject, al-Fuḍayl b. 'Iyāḍ, became with the passage of time "less and less of a Sunni and more and more of a Sufi," Chabbi has suggested that early Sufis, though well aware that al-Fuḍayl was no mystic, chose him as a precursor because he lent a cachet of pious orthodoxy to their still-marginal movement.¹⁷⁶ The same appears true of Bishr. Irreproachable except perhaps for his failure to marry, he could serve as a symbol of Sufi conformance to Sunni orthopraxy. Moreover, his teachings, like al-Fuḍayl's, anticipated the appearance of an epistemology separate from Ḥadīth-study. Although Bishr did not reject *'ilm* (Ḥadīth-study) in favor of *ma'rifa* (mystical gnosis), he still rejected it, which was enough to ensure his admission to the *tā'ifa*.

Despite their assimilation of the early ascetics, the early Sufi authorities deserve credit (as Melchert has most recently and forcefully argued) for preserving their dicta more or less faithfully. That is, they do not put mystical pronouncements into their mouths. They did, however, set out to elaborate their vitae. In Bishr's case, this elaboration took place through the adduction of narratives to illustrate his *wilāya* or "affiliation with God." In later Sufi

¹⁷⁶ Chabbi, "Fuḍayl," 336 and 345.

biography, he has a dramatic conversion experience that turns him from a life of crime. His pronouncements against Ḥadīth-scholarship become progressively more vitriolic. He attains fame for his barefootedness, to which the Persian biographers assign mystical rather than ascetical significance. He shuns fame, but is condemned to suffer the adulation of his contemporaries. Finally, his sisters become famous too. In several accounts, they unwittingly compromise his striving for austerity. In other reports, however, one of them, Mukhkha, proves equally if not more devoted than he to the maintenance of perfect scrupulosity. Although many of these stories possess doubtful value as documentary history, they do illustrate the *ṭāʾifa*'s success in recasting its exemplars as conduits of continuing revelation. In the conviction that every word and deed of the *awliyā*' possessed esoteric meaning, biographers created not only new interpretations of older stories but entirely new stories to be interpreted.

No matter how elaborate Bishr's vitae become, one constant is an interest in comparing him to Ibn Ḥanbal. This relationship possessed particular significance for biographers because it could function as a synecdoche for the relationship between the Sufis and the Ḥadīth-community. Most often, in the writings of both *ṭāʾifas*, the two exemplars express their admiration for one another. Even so, biographers appear to have taken the fact that the two men never met as a sign that, were they to meet (in a fabricated report, perhaps), an awkward interchange would occur, compromising the entente between the *ṭāʾifas*. Ibn Ḥanbal, they felt, could not approve of a man who was indifferent to Ḥadīth, nor could Bishr defer to a man who was suspicious of any but exoteric knowledge. With very few exceptions, transmitters appear to have concluded that a meeting between Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr could not be described without producing a definite statement of one man's superiority to the other. Even in dream-visions where Ibn Ḥanbal announces that he and Bishr have both been admitted to heaven, the two men do not appear in the same place at the same time.

In an earlier study of Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr, I argued that the former was an "inner-worldly ascetic" and the latter a "world-renouncing mystic." Weber's account of the two types, and of the relationship between them, does account remarkably well for the attributes both figures display in the later sources.¹⁷⁷ As far as the piety each man exemplified during his lifetime is concerned, however, it would be more accurate to call both of them ascetics. Here it is tempting to accept Gert Mueller's argument that Weber should have posulated two more permutations, a "world-renouncing ascetic" and an "inner-worldly mystic."¹⁷⁸ Ibn Ḥanbal would still be the inner-worldly ascetic who regards himself as the instrument of God. His quest for merit consists in opposing the almost irretrievably corrupt institutions of the world. Bishr, for his part, would now be a world-renouncing ascetic: that is, he rejects the world

¹⁷⁷ Weber, *Sociology*, 166–83; Cooperson, "Ibn Ḥanbal," 91.

¹⁷⁸ Mueller, "Mysticism," 71ff.

as sinful, and does not seek to act in it or upon it.¹⁷⁹ As an ascetic, Bishr was closer in orientation to Ibn Ḥanbal than the Sufi tradition admits. Precisely because of the similarity, however, the remaining differences took on heightened significance. The biographers, like the parties involved, did not articulate these differences using descriptive terms like “asceticism” and “mysticism.” Even so, they seem uneasily aware that the exemplarity of both men implied a threat to the premises on which their respective *tāʾifas* justified their claims to knowledge. For this reason, they display a lively interest in reports that attempt to articulate and thereby delimit and control the difference. The most significant of these reports is the one that depicts Bishr as unwilling to stand up for Ibn Ḥanbal during the Inquisition. For the imam’s biographers, this declaration amounted to a concession that the scholars, not the ascetics, were the true heirs of the Prophet.

The Sufi biographers did not take issue with this report, at least not explicitly. As a rebuttal, however, they had available Abū Nuʾaym’s dictum that even prophets will envy the reward of the *awliyāʾ* on the Day of Resurrection.¹⁸⁰ Sufi biographers who accepted this characterization may thus have been justified in supposing that Bishr declined to stand where the prophets stand because he was already standing in a higher place. Although he supported Ibn Ḥanbal and Sunnism against the tyrannical heresy of the Abbasid Inquisition, Bishr needed neither Ḥadīth nor theology to find his way to God. Furthermore, he refused to let the travails of the *umma* interrupt his quest. Of course, the biographers did not make any of these claims explicitly. True to the Sufi emphasis on external validation of the *walī*’s internal state, they preferred to use the testimony of purported eyewitnesses. Ibn Ḥanbal, for example, far from joining those who condemned Bishr’s passivity, declares him the standard by which action in the world should be judged. Even the caliph al-Maʾmūn acknowledges Bishr’s virtue, declaring that he, not Ibn Ḥanbal, was the only one before whom the Baghdadis stood abashed. Historically credible or not, this is the Bishr that his biographers gave to posterity.

¹⁷⁹ A world-renouncing mystic, on the other hand, would flee it merely to avoid being distracted by it; while an inner-worldly mystic would see it as a manifestation of the Deity into which he seeks to dissolve himself (*ibid.*, 75ff).

¹⁸⁰ *HA*, I: 5.

Conclusions

Ever since I developed a taste for literature and learning, I sought out the biographies of scholars and men of letters . . . like one enamored and impassioned, searching as a lover for his beloved.

Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī¹

With ardor I sought out the biographies and death-dates of worthy men of the past, reading of those whom each period had brought together; and the material I collected compelled me to seek more of it, and pursue the subject further.

Ibn Khallikān²

This study began by suggesting that the notion of heirship proved formative of the Arabic biographical tradition. The genre originated among *akhbārīs*, not Ḥadīth-scholars. It appears to have grown out of the pre-Islamic practice of combining a genealogy with a narrative about the persons named. However, it assumed its characteristic form by adopting a particular kind of genealogy – the transmission of knowledge – as a model. Nearly any *ṭāʾifa*, that is, any group of persons engaged in the transmission of *ʿilm*, could attain sufficient dignity to merit the composition of a collective biography. Some early subjects of biography, such as singers and poets, had little or nothing to do with the religious sciences. Other groups, such as scholars of language, used biography to argue that they did have a role to play in matters of faith. When the Ḥadīth-scholars belatedly began writing biography, they did so in the shadow of the *akhbārīs*, who already had to their credit such monumental achievements as the biography of the Prophet.

Of the many notions of heirship current in the pre-modern Muslim milieu, that of heirship to the Prophet proved the most influential as a religious and political metaphor. Each of the four groups we have surveyed – the Abbasid caliphs, the Shiite Imams, the Sunni scholars, and the proto-Sufi ascetics – claimed heirship to Muḥammad, or had biographers claim it on their behalf. The textual careers of our four exemplars, including what biographers in each

¹ MU, I:27. ² Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, I: 19.

īāʾifa had to say about the representatives of the others, suggest that the heirship metaphor served several important functions. First, it served as a vehicle for asserting the legitimacy of one's own tradition of authority. Second, it provided a pretext for expressing dissatisfaction with unjust rulers and a template for constructing descriptions of better ones. As expressed or implied in biography, the heirship metaphor also gave representatives of competing traditions a common basis for evaluating each other's claims. At best, it provided a framework within which mutually beneficial divisions of labor could be proposed or vindicated. At worst, it made their disagreements all the more deeply felt. Flexible enough to serve different and even radically opposed agendas, the metaphor retained its power even as the reputations of particular exemplars were reinterpreted, re-evaluated, and in some cases changed almost beyond recognition.

In the first half of the third/ninth century, the traditions of heirship to the Prophet evince little of the coherence they were to display in the subsequent literary tradition. The caliph al-Ma'mūn emphasized his heirship to Muḥammad by claiming the office of rightly guiding leader (*imām al-hudā*). However, he made this claim against the Abbasid caliphate, not on its behalf. In effect, he was a Shiite-sympathizing rebel who led a second Khurasani revolution against the caliphate. His designated successor, 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā, claimed the imamate on the basis of his Alid descent, and more specifically on the interpretive authority presumed to subsist in the lineal descendants of the Prophet's grandson al-Ḥusayn. However, not all Imami Shiites accepted al-Riḍā's claim, preferring to believe that his father, the previous Imam, had been the last of the line. Meanwhile, the self-proclaimed "people of the *sunna*" had come to develop their Ḥadīth-based, anti-Alid notions of heirship to Muḥammad. Some accepted Abbasid patronage, and served the state as judges. Others, however, refused to acquiesce in an arrangement that made them subordinate to the caliph as interpreters of the *sunna*. Of the latter group, some proclaimed their own authority to "enjoin good and forbid evil," while others retired into clannish isolation behind a barrier of scrupulosity. The fourth tradition we have examined, Sufism, hardly existed at all in this period. Its forerunners were to be found among the proto-Sunnis, specifically those who enjoined scrupulosity and asceticism but looked askance at the single-minded pursuit of Ḥadīth. Such figures evidently symbolized pious opposition to al-Ma'mūn's theologically assertive regime, and appear as characters in the recurrent tales of ragged zealots who challenge the authority of the caliph. But the zealots' real-life counterparts, the Sunni renunciants, had yet to develop a distinctive epistemology that set them apart from their Ḥadīth-minded colleagues.

In the biographical tradition of subsequent ages, each of these traditions took on a coherence possible only in retrospect. This reformulation of the past emerges most clearly from the biographies written to commemorate the exemplars of each tradition. Of our four subjects, al-Ma'mūn appears to have

undergone the greatest number of reversals. First, his biographers cut his pretensions down to size. Admire him though they might, they did not take his claims to the “rightly guided imamate” very seriously. Their critical distance is plausible enough given his record of scandalizing the representatives of nearly every strain of religious and political conviction. Moreover, his biographers, unlike those of the other exemplars, did not themselves belong to the *ṭāʾifa* they were commemorating. With the decline of the caliphate, however, the Sunnis rallied around the now-pathetic Abbasids. As part of this process, the biographers depicted al-Maʾmūn as a master of Ḥadīth and a defender of Sunnism. To make this recuperation work, his designation of an Alid heir and his summoning of the Inquisition were swept under the rug. The caliph, not to mention the victims of the Inquisition, would doubtless have been perplexed, if not appalled, had he lived to witness such an odd transformation. Later, the biographers of the Mamluk period, far in time and space from the factional strife in Baghdad, saw through the pious misrepresentations of their predecessors. Having uncovered the scandals, they declared that al-Maʾmūn’s Shiite convictions led him to espouse the doctrine of the created Qurʾān. This particular conclusion is inaccurate, but the biographers’ achievement stands. Despite their disapproval of his conduct, they granted him the dignity of being judged on the basis of creeds he actually espoused.

Al-Maʾmūn’s Alid heir apparent, ʿAlī al-Riḍā, fared far better, at least in some quarters. Disbelieved, questioned, and harassed during his lifetime, he appears a century later as the eighth Imam of the Twelver Shiites. His eventual vindication doubtless owes something to his own efforts, preserved in the responsa he tirelessly delivered to followers and skeptics alike. Just as important, however, was the contribution of his partisans, who circulated his responsa, recounted his virtues, and supplied whatever miracle-tales were necessary to prove his imamate. Even so, the dispute apparently continued well into the fourth/tenth century. Otherwise it is difficult to explain the titanic efforts of Ibn Bābawayh to prove al-Riḍā’s imamate beyond any doubt. To help make his case, the biographer insisted that al-Riḍā died in proper imamic fashion, murdered by the caliph. Al-Maʾmūn perforce assumed the role of villain, hardly a just reward for his lifelong advocacy of the Alid cause. Later Twelvers took issue not only with Ibn Bābawayh’s inclusion of miracle-tales, but also with his presumption that al-Maʾmūn poisoned the Imam. Their objections are cogent, and do them credit. But the Twelver conviction that the Imams, not the caliphs, were the true heirs of the Prophet made any such discussion marginal. In effect, al-Maʾmūn’s real crime was claiming the caliphate while al-Riḍā was alive. Anyone who would do that, the Twelver tradition has concluded, would hardly shrink from poisoning his rival. Yet it is not at all clear what would have happened had al-Riḍā actually assumed the caliphate. In retrospect, at least, his untimely death spared him the opprobrium of collusion with the tyrant, and preserved the Shiite imamate as an oppositional ideal of heirship to the Prophet.

While al-Riḍā's biographers insisted that al-Ma'mūn's kindness to the Imam had been a trick, Ibn Ḥanbal's biographers eventually convinced themselves that the Abbasid persecution of their exemplar had been a fortunate mistake. They had first to establish that Ibn Ḥanbal never gave in to the Inquisition, and that his resistance had vindicated their belief that the Qur'ān was uncreated. In reality, Ibn Ḥanbal appears to have given little thought to the createdness of the Qur'ān before the Inquisition. Only after being interrogated, threatened with death, imprisoned, tried again, and finally flogged by al-Ma'mūn's successor al-Mu'taṣim did he emerge as a fluent advocate of the creationist position. More important, he assumed the role of destined defender of the faith, patron saint of the *sunna*, and *baraka*-wielding arbiter of salvation. Given his enormous prestige, his biographers exercised admirable restraint in writing about him. Many, admittedly, gave their imaginations free rein when describing his trial and flogging. But even this enthusiasm appears justified in view of the plausible and persistent rumors that he had indeed capitulated under the lash. With only minor exceptions, furthermore, the Ḥanbalīs respected the imam's insistence upon deference to temporal authority. The eventual accommodation between the *ahl al-sunna* and the caliphate was helped along by al-Mutawakkil's capitulation to Sunnism and the subsequent decline of the Abbasid dynasty. Later Sunni biographers, including the Mamluk-period authorities, continued to represent Ibn Ḥanbal as the champion of Sunnism against the deadly heresy of the Inquisition. But they did not blame the Abbasid caliphate, or question its heirship to the Prophet. Rather, they depicted al-Ma'mūn as an exception to the rule. Many, moreover, took pains to point out the baleful influence of the court theologians, without whom the caliphs would never have dared abuse Ibn Ḥanbal. The result of these reformulations is a division of labor that echoes actual arrangements in the Mamluk period: a figurehead caliph, a sultan with (theoretically) limited juristic authority, and a scholarly class that enjoyed a (theoretical) monopoly on interpretive authority.

A second accommodation emerges from the study of Bishr al-Ḥāfī, like Ibn Ḥanbal a pious exemplar of the *ahl al-sunna*. In his own day, Bishr, like many of his contemporaries, had his doubts about the utility of Ḥadīth-study. Even so, the Ḥadīth-minded could not bring themselves to condemn him. Unlike al-Muḥāsibī, whom they did condemn, Bishr propounded no doctrine for his detractors to pounce on. Moreover, he was conspicuously pious, ascetical, and scrupulous, so much so that Ibn Ḥanbal regarded him as an exemplar. The event that cemented their uneasy alliance was the Inquisition. Ibn Ḥanbal, as Bishr explained, had stood where the prophets stand: that is, he had assumed Moses' role of defying Pharaoh. Bishr himself, as everyone knew, had done nothing but praise the imam and deplore his failure to speak in his defense. The ascetics, represented by Bishr, thus conceded Ibn Ḥanbal's authority. The imam, for his part, reciprocated the gesture. He expressed his gratitude for Bishr's approval, and eventually came to agree that one should not teach

Ḥadīth (at least not to princes). In later centuries, the balance of power shifted, at least in retrospect. The Sufi tradition, of which Bishr himself was only a precursor, announced that he had been one of its founding members. In his new role as Sufi exemplar, Bishr acquired a conversion, an almost indispensable topos of Sufi exemplarity, along with the power to work miracles and convey mystical insight. His comments against the Ḥadīth-scholars also grow sharper. By implication, too, his passivity during the Inquisition is justified: a mere ascetic might confront the world, but a true mystic simply transcends it. By the Mamluk period, even the rigorous and skeptical al-Dhahabī could only proclaim that God alone could judge between Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr al-Ḥāfi.

On the basis of these case studies, this essay offers a response to the question of where biography stands in relation to historiography on the one hand and literature on the other. As a supplement to annalistic historiography, biography served as a venue for commentary on the events of history. To do so, it necessarily adopted techniques of plotting and characterization conventionally associated with fictional narration. But the presence of these techniques does not, I think, account for the fascination these texts exerted on such readers as Yāqūt, Ibn Khallikān, and al-Ṣafadī. Rather, I would propose, the reader's (or listener's) appreciation of biography depended upon the comparison of any one account to all the other known versions of the "same" story, and indeed of all the other accounts that had any bearing on the topic. This intertextual effect is particularly easy to discern in the cases I have presented, which offer multiple perspectives on a limited set of personalities and events. But I suggest that this effect is the quintessential literary achievement of pre-modern Arabic prose. The single most important consideration when seeking to understand both the documentary and literary effects of a report is not the identity of its eyewitnesses, transmitters, or compilers, or even the genre to which it belongs, but rather the presence of other reports that substantiate, contradict, or complement it, and by virtue of these relationships set up a necessarily interpretive and critical chain of associations in the reader's mind. In choosing traditions that had a great deal to say about each other, I have proposed my own set of associations. Others, not least the parties themselves, would doubtless propose others. Having checked my reactions against those of the biographers whenever possible, I am nevertheless confident that the associations and connections offered here are plausible ones given the extant evidence, and as such contribute to our understanding of how premodern Arab-Islamic culture told its most important stories.

Appendix: The circumstances of ‘Alī al-Riḍā’s death

An early report states that ‘Alī b. Hishām poisoned al-Riḍā. The source for the report, al-Ya‘qūbī, expresses little confidence in it, introducing it with “it is said” (*qīl*). But he does seem sure that, if al-Riḍā was poisoned, al-Ma’mūn was not responsible.¹ Given the suspicious timing of al-Riḍā’s death and the evidence for al-Ma’mūn’s innocence,² it appears worthwhile to investigate al-Ya‘qūbī’s report more closely. Although the report itself cannot be corroborated, it suggests the broader possibility that someone like ‘Alī b. Hishām – that is, one of al-Ma’mūn’s *abnā’* commanders – took the step of removing al-Riḍā without the caliph’s knowledge or consent. To substantiate the plausibility of this suggestion, it will be necessary to look more closely at other reports of the events in Marv and Tūs.

There is ample evidence that the *abnā’* in Baghdad opposed the designation of al-Riḍā.³ Not surprisingly, their comrades in Khurasan shared their dismay. According to al-Jahshiyārī, al-Ma’mūn asked al-Faḍl b. Sahl to justify to the commander Nu‘aym b. Ḥāzim the designation of al-Riḍā as heir apparent. Nu‘aym was a descendant of the *abnā’ al-da‘wa*: in his response to al-Faḍl, he cited his family’s longtime service to the Hāshimī cause. He then declared that “he would not accept humiliation, nor accept obedience to one whose blood he had shed.” Al-Faḍl remonstrated with him, but Nu‘aym retorted: “You only want to take the kingship from the Abbasids and give it to the Alids, and then plot against them [in turn] to make the government Kisrawī,” i.e., Sasanid. In support of this accusation, he noted that the court had adopted not the Alid white but rather green, “the uniform of Chosroes and the Magians.” He then turned to al-Ma’mūn and said: “Fear God, Commander of the Believers! Don’t let [al-Faḍl] cheat you of your religion and your rule, for the men of Khurasan (*ahl Khurāsān*) will not swear allegiance to a man whose blood drips from their swords.” Al-Ma’mūn ordered Nu‘aym out, then asked al-Faḍl whether he should kill him. Al-Faḍl advised against this plan, noting that the caliph had recently killed Harthama b. A‘yan⁴ and Yaḥyā b.

¹ Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, II: 550–51; and above, p. 90.

² See above, pp. 29–32.

³ See above, p. 31.

⁴ See above, pp. 96–97.

‘Amir⁵ and ordered the humiliation of ‘Abd Allāh b. Mālik,⁶ all members of the *abnā’*. Any more provocation, and the Khurasanis would rise. Al-Faḍl thus recommended that Nu‘aym be sent to fight against Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī. Nu‘aym was duly sent, and (as al-Ma’mūn had feared) went over to the side of the counter-caliph.⁷ Although this report appears to be a bit of nasty anti-Faḍl propaganda, the suspicions it ascribes to both sides are entirely plausible. Many of the *abnā’* had gone over to al-Amīn, giving the caliph reason to fear that others might desert to Ibrāhīm. The *abnā’*, meanwhile, had been ill-treated by al-Ma’mūn, a circumstance they blamed on Faḍl.⁸ Given this state of affairs, Nu‘aym might well view the designation of al-Riḍā as another plot by the vizier, while al-Ma’mūn would hear Nu‘aym’s warning about the *ahl Khurāsān* as a threat.

Under these circumstances, the last thing the caliph might be expected to do would be to put the *abnā’* in charge of al-Riḍā’s safety. Yet that is apparently what he did. In his *Asmā’ al-mugh̃tālīn*, Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb (d. 245/859–60) reports that al-Ma’mūn appointed a police detail (*shurṭa*) and a guard (*ḥaras*) for al-Riḍā.⁹ The former may have presided over his public audiences while the latter served as a private guard.¹⁰ The head of the police is named as al-‘Abbās b. Ja‘far b. Muḥammad b. al-Ash‘ath, who appears to be the *banawī* of that name who was sent to al-Ma’mūn’s court in Marv after serving as governor of Khurasan under al-Rashīd.¹¹ The head of the guard is named as Sa‘īd b. Salm,¹² who may be the Sa‘īd b. Salm who governed Mosul, Ṭabaristān, the Jazīra, and Sind under Hārūn.¹³ Of these two men, the first, al-‘Abbās b. Ja‘far, had a background similar to that of Nu‘aym b. Ḥāzim. He was a descendant of one of the first supporters of the Abbasid *da‘wa*, and his brother ‘Uqba fought on the side of al-Amīn in the civil war. A less likely guarantor of al-Riḍā’s safety is hard to imagine. The second man, Sa‘īd b. Salm (if it is indeed he), was of Syrian rather than *banawī* descent; his appointment may thus represent an attempt on al-Ma’mūn’s part to counterbalance the power of the *abnā’* in al-Riḍā’s *shurṭa*.

⁵ Yahya b. ‘Āmir b. Ismā‘īl al-Ḥārithī (d. 200), “a quintessential Banawī” (Crone) who accompanied Harthama to Marv. He addressed the caliph as *amīr al-kāfirīn*, and was executed on the spot (Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, II: 546; *TRM*, VIII: 535; Tabari, *Reunification*, 45 n. 135; Crone, *Slaves*, 257 n. 604).

⁶ A son of one of the *naqīb*s, and head of the *shurṭa* under al-Mahdī, al-Hādī, and Harūn (Crone, *Slaves*, 181–82). Al-Jahshiyārī’s sources claim that he was ousted by al-Faḍl on trumped-up charges of sexual licence and cursing his (al-Faḍl’s) mother (314–16).

⁷ Jahshiyārī, *Wuzarā’*, 312–14; cited in Arazī and El’ad, “Epître,” 67: 32.

⁸ See Harthama’s insults to him in *ibid.*, 317–18.

⁹ Ibn Ḥabīb, *Asmā’*, 201–2.

¹⁰ See Tyan, *Organisation judiciaire*, II: 352–435; Crone, *Slaves*, 248, notes 474 and 475.

¹¹ Crone, *Slaves*, 185. If the *Mugh̃tālīn* report is correct, Crone’s guess that al-‘Abbās went over to al-Amīn is mistaken. ¹² The text reads *sybm*, which appears to be an error.

¹³ Crone, *Slaves*, 137–38. The statement in Arazī and El’ad, “Epître,” that “le Ḥājib de ‘Alī al-Riḍā n’était autre que Shabīb b. Ḥumayd b. Qaḥaba l’ex-gouverneur de Qūmis,” with a reference to Crone, *Slaves*, 198, is an error: Crone tells us only that Shabīb was the head of al-Ma’mūn’s *ḥaras*, as is stated in Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, II: 574.

Shortly after the caliph's party departed for Iraq, al-Riḍā died. The man suspected of murdering him is 'Alī b. Hishām al-Marwazī (d. 217/832), who, it is said, served him a poisoned pomegranate. Originally from Khurasan, 'Alī served as al-Ḥasan b. Sahl's deputy in Baghdad and took an active part in the struggle for control of the city. He was one of the caliph's confidants, and later served as governor in Jibāl, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.¹⁴ Given his *banawī* background and his direct knowledge of the circumstances in Iraq, 'Alī b. Hishām is a plausible candidate to have attempted to further the caliph's interests by doing away with al-Riḍā. However, it is difficult to place him in Ṭūs at the time of the Imam's death. He was reportedly in Marv in 198/813,¹⁵ but appears to have gone thereafter to Iraq. When al-Ma'mūn left Sarakhs for Iraq in Shawwāl 202/April 818, 'Alī was encamped at Nahrawān, a town north of Baghdad. In Ṣafar/September of the same year, al-Riḍā died. In Dhū al-Ḥijja 203/June 819, 'Alī appears in Karkh, the southwest suburb of Baghdad, having been active in the negotiations preceding the capitulation of Ibrāhīm's forces.¹⁶ This sequence gives 'Alī six months to travel approximately 800 miles to Ṭūs and poison al-Riḍā, and then nine months to return to Baghdad. However, al-Ṭabarī's account gives the impression that he was continuously involved in the fighting around the capital.¹⁷

According to the Shiite sources, al-Riḍā was buried at the house of Ḥumayd b. Qaḥṭaba al-Ṭā'ī, next to al-Rashīd¹⁸ (who had died there while campaigning against Rāfi' b. al-Layth). Ḥumayd b. Qaḥṭaba died in Khurasan, after serving as governor under al-Mahdī, in 159.¹⁹ According to al-Ṭabarī, however, al-Rashīd was interred in a house belonging to Junayd b. 'Abd al-Rahmān or Ḥumayd b. Abī Ghānim.²⁰ Junayd was an Umayyad governor of Khurasan, and had died in 115 or 116.²¹ Ḥumayd b. Abī Ghānim was governor of Sistān under Hārūn, and fought with al-Ḥasan b. Sahl against Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī; he died in 210.²² Given the order of their appointments and deaths, these three men (Ḥumayd b. Qaḥṭaba, Junayd b. 'Abd al-Rahmān, and Ḥumayd b. Abī Ghānim) appear to have owned the house in turn. Also, it is possible that the Shiite sources confused Ḥumayd b. Abī Ghānim with Ḥumayd b. Qaḥṭaba: Abū Ghānim (i.e., 'Abd al-Hamīd b. Rib'ī al-Ṭā'ī) was actually a cousin of Qaḥṭaba.²³ In any event, the likely owner at the time al-Ma'mūn's party passed through the region is Ḥumayd b. Abī Ghānim. At the time of al-Riḍā's death, he, like 'Alī b. Hishām, was in Iraq, engaged in a series of battles and negotiations with Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī.²⁴

Taken together, these reports suggest the following reconstruction. Even before al-Riḍā's designation, al-Faḍl had embarked on a campaign to contain

¹⁴ *KB*, index; *TRM*, VIII: 543–44, 546, 595, 614, 622, 626. ¹⁵ Jahshiyārī, *Wuzarā'*, 304.

¹⁶ *TRM*, VIII: 565–66, 571–72, 574.

¹⁷ 'Alī was eventually executed by al-Ma'mūn. A written notice attached to his severed head explained that he had oppressed the people, spent money wastefully, and shed blood unlawfully (*TRM*, VIII: 627–28; *KB*, 146–48). ¹⁸ *UAR*, I: 18. ¹⁹ Crone, *Slaves*, 188.

²⁰ *TRM*, VIII: 343–44 and 345. ²¹ Crone, *Slaves*, 98. ²² *Ibid.*, 175. ²³ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁴ *TRM*, VIII: 571.

the *abnā'*, either because he feared their desertion or because he wished to maintain his ascendancy over al-Ma'mūn (or both). Some of the *abnā'* had indeed deserted, and those who were left reciprocated al-Faḍl's malevolence, most immediately because they blamed him for the executions of their comrades Yaḥyā b. 'Āmir and Harthama b. A'yan. It was in the interests of al-Ma'mūn's *abnā'* to effect a reconciliation with their Baghdadi counterparts, who, besides being their kinsmen, would serve as a counterweight to the power of the Banū Sahl. However, this could only occur if al-Ma'mūn first effected his own reconciliation with the Abbasids. The designation of al-Riḍā came as the worst possible blow to these hopes: it affirmed the power of al-Faḍl and infuriated the Abbasids in Baghdad. Soon after al-Ma'mūn set out for Iraq, al-Faḍl was murdered at Sarakhs. The perpetrators, though they claimed to be acting on the caliph's orders, were probably agents of the *abnā'* (who may have told them that the orders had come from al-Ma'mūn).²⁵ Next, al-Riḍā, whose police detail consisted of *abnā'*, died near the estate of Ḥumayd b. Abī Ghānim, a prominent *banawī* general then engaged, along with 'Alī b. Hishām, in negotiations with Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī. This sequence of events does not support the claim that 'Alī b. Hishām carried out the poisoning; indeed, it makes it more difficult for him to have done so, at least in person. It does, however, ascribe plausible means, motive, and opportunity to prominent *abnā'* commanders, who could doubtless act through local agents (among them, perhaps, al-Riḍā's *shurṭa*) to carry out the poisoning of the heir apparent. Admittedly the evidence is circumstantial, but no more so than the evidence for al-Ma'mūn's guilt. Given, moreover, the positive evidence for his innocence, the possibility of an *abnā'* conspiracy deserves at least as much attention as the purely impressionistic case against the caliph.

²⁵ On al-Ma'mūn's innocence in the murder of al-Faḍl, see above, p. 32.

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Note on alphabetization

Names that begin with articles such as *al*, *von*, *van*, and *de* are alphabetized according to the main part of the name (*van* Ess, for example, appears as *Ess*, *van*).

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Index

- ‘Abbādī, al- 138, 150
 ‘Abbās, al- 25, 26, 43, 49
 ‘Abbās b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīm al-Anbārī 180
 ‘Abbās b. Miskawayh al-Qurashī 137
 Abbasids 31, 41, 70
 disapproval of 37, 94, 100, 113–17, 180, 187
 Ḥadīth of 54, 67
 as heirs of the Prophet 26, 27, 29, 33, 49, 62
 later Sunni view of 61–67, 110, 136, 137
 religious authority of 34–35, 60, 62, n188
 rise to power of 25–26, 29–30
 see also caliphs
abdāl 143–44
 ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak 157
 ‘Abd Allāh b. Mūsā 89 n94, 116 n59
 ‘Abd Allāh b. Tamīm al-Qurashī 98
 ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Maqdisī 137
 ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Iṣḥāq 120, 121, 123, 126, 129, 151
 ‘Abdī, al- *see* Muḥammad al-‘Abdī
abnā’, *abnā’ al-dawla* 25–26, 28, 116, 157, 193–96
 Ibn Ḥanbal’s descent from 64, 109, 119
 as opponents of al-Ma’mūn 28, 36, 37, 39, 68, 157, 172
 and al-Riḍā 31, 32
 Abū ‘Alī al-Fadakī 173
 Abū ‘Amr b. al-‘Alā’ 12, 13
 Abū al-‘Arab 130
 Abū al-Aswad al-Du‘alī 12
 Abū Bakr (caliph) 24–25, 70, 107, 138
 polemical opinions on 33, 46, 86, 89
 Abū Bakr al-Khallāl 109, 110, 142
 Abū Bakr al-Marrūdhī 112, 113, 148, 155, 171
 Abū Bakr al-Qaṭī‘ī 155
 Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī 11, 72, 73, 74, 87–90, 91
 Abū al-Fidā 175
 Abū Ḥafṣ al-Nīsābūrī 162
 Abū Ḥamza al-Šūfī 179–80
 Abū Ḥanīfa 53, 57 n171
 Abū Hāshim 159
 Abū al-Haytham *see* Khālīd al-Haddād
 Abū ‘Imrān 130–31, 132, 133, 138
 Abū Khaythama 118
 Abū Mikhnaf 5
 Abū Mushir al-Ghassānī 37, 43–44
 Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī 19, 175, 187
 as biographer of Bishr al-Hāfi 165–70, 171–73, 176, 177, 179, 181, 182
 as biographer of Ibn Ḥanbal 111, 131, 134, 138, 146, 153, 179, 181, 182
 Abū al-Šalt al-Harawī
 as associate of al-Ma’mūn 85–86, 89
 as associate of al-Riḍā 85–86, 87
 cited by Ibn Bābawayh 87, 90–98, 99
 cited by Iṣfahānī 87–90, 93, 97
 Abū al-Sarāyā 96
 Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī 159, 163
 Abū Yūsuf 4
 Abū Zur’a 117, 139
adab 6–7, 13, 17, 19, 23
adab al-mu’arrikh 18
 ‘adl 42
 ‘afw 42
ahl al-ḥadīth *see* Ḥadīth-scholars
ahl al-sunna (wa ‘l-jamā’a) 33–34, 55, 58, 112–17, 144, 151
 al-Ma’mūn’s view of 33–40, 43–48, 55, 59–60, 115, 151
 and the *zuhhād* 44–45, 114–15, 154–55, 185–87
 and the *‘amma* 46–48, 68, 111–12, 115
 see also Hanbalīs; Sunnis; *zuhhād*
 Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-Ansārī 97–98
 Aḥmad b. al-Faraj 131–34, 135
 ‘Ā’isha 112
akhbār 75, 122, 148, 155
 and the origins of biography 2–8
 and *ta’rikh* 18–20
akhbār al-nās 5, 18
akhbārīs 2–8, 9, 14, 46, 51, 107
 see also *akhbār*; Muḥammad al-‘Abdī

- 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (caliph and Imam) 12, 28,
 49, 54, 55, 86
 as Imam 30, 70–72, 78, 90, 98
 al-Ma'mūn's veneration of 29, 38, 43, 51,
 53, 91
 and the succession 24, 33, 70
 as Sufi exemplar 100
 'Alī b. Hishām 32, 90, 91
 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm b. Hāshim 98
 'Alī b. 'Isā b. Māhān 26
 'Alī b. Khashram 166, 172
 Alids 70–71, 72, 78
 as heirs of the Prophet 24, 25
 and al-Ma'mūn 28–32, 34, 51, 73, 89 n94,
 91–92
 sentiment against 34, 37, 56, 63, 70–71
 allies of God *see awliyā'*
 Amīn, al- (caliph) 26–28, 37, 41, 46, 49, 172
 Āmina al-Ramlīya 183
 'amma, al- 46, 75, 89, 133, 139
 and the *ahl al-sunna* 33, 46, 112, 115, 123
 al-Ma'mūn's view of 33, 38, 40, 46–48, 111
amr bi 'l-ma'rūf, al- 31, 38, 45, 58, 60,
 115–16
 Anṣār 24, 25
 Anṣārī, Zakariyā' al- 174, 184
 anthropomorphism 33, 40, 122, 142, 148
see also tashbīh
 Ardashīr 22
 'Arūsī, Muṣṭafā al- 174
 asceticism *see zuhd*
 ascetics *see zuhhād*
 Ash'arī, al- 110–11
 'Asqalānī, Ibn Ḥajar al- 8
 'Aṭṭār 173–74
awā'il 12n56, 16
 'Awj b. 'Unuq 170
awliyā' 15, 141–49, 152, 162, 165, 186–87
 definitions of 141n147, 164
 'Awāna b. al-Hakam 4
 'ayyārūn 140, 166, 171–72
 in civil war 28, 31, 37, 38, 68
see also fityān

badal see abdāl
badī' 11
 Banū Mūsā 32
baraka 138–39, 139n139, 142, 144–46, 151,
 153, 171
 Bayhaqī, al- 136
 Benjamin of Tudela 62
 Bilāl al-Khawwāš 182
 Bishr b. al-Hāfi 100, 149, 154–55, 185–87
 attitude towards Ḥadīth of 157, 162,
 163–64, 168–70, 172, 180, 187
 and 'ayyārūn 166, 171–72
 barefootedness of 158, 173–75
 fame of 170–73
 in Abū Nu'aym's *Hilya* 165–70, 171–73, 176
 as Ḥadīth-scholar 155, 158
 and Ibn Ḥanbal 113, 138, 152, 153, 155,
 157, 170, 176–84, 186–87
 in al-Khaṭīb's *Ta'rikh* 168–69, 176–77
 al-Ma'mūn's view of 155, 184, 187
 and the *miḥna* 171, 180–82, 184, 187
 sisters of 175–78
 portrayed as Sufi 157, 161–62
 and Sufi contemporaries 156, 164
 in al-Sulamī's *Ṭabaqāt* 162–63
 as *zāhid* 155, 161, 162, 171
 Bishr al-Marīsī 37, 47, 135
budalā' see abdāl
 Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismā'il al- 4, 7
 Burghūth 122
 Buyids 16–17, 61
 Byzantines 33, 53, 59

 caliphs
 biographies of 3, 15, 17, 19–23
 as heirs of the Prophet 13, 19, 24, 27, 33,
 49, 53, 62, 152–53
 Ḥanbalī view of 113–14, 115–17, 124–25,
 151–52
 later Sunni view of 61–67, 110, 136, 137
 Twelver view of 98–100
see also Abbasids; Umayyads
 Companions (of the Prophet) 3, 6, 15, 45–46,
 86, 128, 153, 154
 as sources of *sunna* 33, 55–56, 112
 conversion 87, 166–67
 createdness *see khalq al-Qur'ān*

 Dāraqutnī, al- 4
da'wa 28, 29, 172
 Dhahabī, al- 19, 76, 100, 182
 as compiler 8, 15, 17
 as biographer of Bishr al-Hāfi 170
 as biographer of al-Ma'mūn 63–64, 66
 as biographer of Ibn Ḥanbal 136, 139,
 148–49, 153, 182
 Dhū al-Nūn 157, 162, 163
 Dī'bīl b. 'Alī al-Khuzā'i 89
 dream-visions 83, 131, 182–84
 of God 135
 of Ibn Ḥanbal 145–46, 182–84
 of the Prophet 129, 150–51

 Faḍl b. Dukayn, al- 58
 Faḍl b. al-Rabī', al- 41
 Faḍl b. Sahl, al- 22, 31, 32, 88, 96
 Faṭḥ b. Khāqān, al- 139–40
 Fāṭima 24, 30, 70, 77, 78
fiqh 5, 6n28, 36, 65, 108, 121
 al-Ma'mūn's knowledge of 43, 48, 53, 65
 of Ḥanbalīs 110, 111, 121–22, 149–50,
 176–78

- see also fuquahā*
fityān 140–41, 166
see also ‘ayyārūn
 Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyād, al- 45, 159, 162, 163, 166–67, 170
 compared with Bishr 155, 185
fuqahā’ 54, 112, 147, 160, 161, 167
 biographies of 1, 3, 8, 14, 17
 and the *miḥna* 33, 35–36, 65

 genealogy 2–3
 Ghadīr Khumm 70–71, 72
 Ghadr 85
ghayba 168
ghulāh 82–83, 92
 Ghulām Khalīl 159
ghuluww *see ghulāh*
 grammarians 11–13, 15

 Ḥadīth 10, 12, 15, 40, 86, 92, 151
 of Abbasids 54, 67
 application of 141
 attacks on 92, 122
 as basis for *fiqh* 108, 122, 125, 126
 and biography 7–8, 13
 citations of 59, 81, 92, 99, 112, 114, 115, 120, 121, 129, 132, 139, 154, 163
 emergence of 2, 4–7, 107–08
 study and teaching of 53–55, 56–58, 81, 108–09, 110, 112
 see also Ḥadīth-scholars; *sunna*
ḥadīth mursāl 169
ḥadīth qudsī 169
 Ḥadīth-scholars 86, 107–09, 120, 133, 151, 153, 161, 167
 caliphs as 53–61
 biographies of 7–8, 14
 criticized by *zuhhād* 155, 157, 162, 163, 168–70, 172, 180
 as heirs of the Prophet 8, 13, 55, 108, 151, 152, 160, 165
 and the *miḥna* 33, 34, 35–36, 43–44
 and the origins of biography 1, 3, 10
 and Sufis 169–70
 see also Ibn Ḥanbal
 Hafṣ al-Farkh 113
 Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf, al- 13
 see also Shu‘ba
 Ḥamdūn al-Qaṣṣār 162
 Ḥanbal b. Ishāq 109, 116, 119, 148
 as biographer of Ibn Ḥanbal 114–26, 129
 Ḥanbalīs 61, 109, 110–11, 116, 151–53
 biographical practice of 129–51
 and Shāfi‘īs 149–51
 and Sufis 111, 146–48, 153, 179–80
 and *zuhhād* 144, 155, 168–70, 185–87
 Ḥarbiya, al- 37, 39
 Harthama b. A‘yan 82, 91, 95, 96–97, 98

 Hasan b. ‘Alī, al- (Imam) 70, 71, 78
 Hasan b. Sahl, al- 31, 88
hashwiya 36, 38
hawādith 19
 Haytham b. ‘Adī, al- 4, 14
ḥikāyāt 163, 167, 169
ḥikma 43
 Hilāl al-Ṣābi’ 68
ḥilm 42
 history, *see hawādith; ta’rīkh*
ḥudūd 38
 Hujwīrī, al- 100, 173
 Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī, al- (Imam) 34, 70, 71, 78, 83, 91

 Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb 111
 Ibn Abī Du‘ād 55, 57
 in Ḥanbalī family accounts 121, 122, 123, 124
 in Ibn al-‘Imrānī’s *Inbā’* 63–64
 in Mu‘tazilī accounts 126, 128
 in Sunni accounts 65, 131, 132, 135, 136, 145
 Ibn Abī Ḥatīm al-Rāzī 158, 168
 Ibn Abī al-Ḥawārī 163
 Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr 20, 41–48, 52, 53, 55, 59, 67
 Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a 15–16
 Ibn Abī Ya‘lā al-Farrā’ 134, 138, 176, 180, 181
 Ibn ‘Asākir 17, 150, 181
 as biographer of al-Ma‘mūn 53, 54, 60, 62, 66, 68
 Ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī 73, 76–84, 86, 90–100
 Ibn al-Bakkā’ al-Aṣghar 119
 Ibn Ḥabīb 14
 Ibn Ḥanbal 55, 57, 65, 108–12, 151–53
 in Abū al-‘Arab’s *Miḥan* 130–31
 in Abū Nu‘aym’s *Ḥilya* 131–34, 146, 165
 admiration for 138–46, 183
 arrest of 118, 119–22
 attitude towards the state of 113–14, 115–17, 124–25, 151–52
 baraka of 133–34, 135–37, 141, 145–46
 and Bishr al-Ḥafī 113, 138, 152, 153, 155, 157, 170, 176–84, 186–87
 confinement of 113–14
 emulation of 141–42
 in family biographies 112–25, 152
 fiqh of 36, 108, 112–17, 138, 176
 flogging of 122–24, 126–28, 130, 139–40, 181
 in Ibn al-Farrā’’s *Ṭabaqāt* 134–36, 176
 in Ibn al-‘Imrānī’s *Inbā’* 63–64
 in Ibn al-Jawzī’s *Manāqib* 136, 139–46
 interrogations of 118–19, 120–21, 126–28
 popular support for 39, 46

- Ibn Ḥanbal (*cont.*)
 possible capitulation of 125–29, 131, 134, 152
 and proto-Sunnis 112–17
 as *rijāl*-critic 5, 7
 and Sufis 111, 146–48, 153, 179–80
zuhd of 113–15, 143, 147
- Ibn Hibbān al-Bustī 158
- Ibn Hishām 107
- Ibn al-ʿImrānī 53, 62–64, 66, 68
- Ibn Ishāq 5, 6, 70
- Ibn al-Jawzī 14, 150, 153
 as biographer of Ibn Ḥanbal 136–46, 149, 181
 as critic of Abū Nuʿaym 146–47, 153, 177
see also dream-visions; Ḥanbalis; miracles
- Ibn Jubayr 62
- Ibn al-Kalbī 4
- Ibn Kathīr 19, 136
- Ibn Khallikān 15, 17
- Ibn al-Murtaḍā 128
- Ibn al-Muʿtazz 11, 13
- Ibn al-Nadīm 2
- Ibn Qiyāma 79–80
- Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī 174
- Ibn Qutayba 10–11, 14, 45, 158, 173
- Ibn Saʿd 3–4, 6, 8, 10, 18, 129, 157
- Ibn Samāʿa 122, 124
- Ibn Taymīya 111, 147–48
- Ibn Yazīd 19
- Ibn al-Zayyāt 132, 133
- Ibrāhīm b. Adham 162
- Ibrāhīm b. ʿAlī al-Naysabūrī 155
- Ibrāhīm b. Ishāq al-Ḥarbī 155
- Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī 37
 counter-caliphate of 31, 32, 45
 pardon of 37, 41, 42
- ʿilm 8, 12, 15–16, 167, 180
 of caliphs 33, 41, 43, 48, 49–50, 67
 of Ḥadīth-scholars 108–09, 112, 127–28, 141, 147, 167, 185
 of Imams 71, 77–78, 82, 93, 105
 of Sufis, *see maʿrifā; taḥqīq*
- Imam (of the Shiites), *see also* ʿAlī; al-Riḍā;
 Twelvers 30, 98–100
 attributes of 70–71, 75, 82–83, 100
 as heirs of the Prophet 70–71, 100
- imam (of Sunnis) 111
see also Ibn Ḥanbal
- imām al-hudā*
 definitions of 27, 34–35, 60, 67–68
 depictions of 41–42, 47–48, 50–51, 52, 53, 62–64
- Imamis 33, 54, 71, 72, 74
- ʿImrān al-Ṣābī 82
- Imruʾ al-Qays 10
- Inquisition, *see miḥna*
- ʿĪsā b. ʿUmar 13
- ʿĪsā b. Yūnus 164, 180
- Iṣfahānī, al-, *see* Abū al-Faraj; Abū Nuʿaym
- Iṣḥāq b. Ḥanbal 110, 118, 119–20, 129
- Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm 33, 34, 44, 110, 119
 in early *miḥna*-accounts 118–19, 123, 124, 125, 127–28
 in later Sunni accounts 132, 133, 136, 137
- Ismāʿīl b. Bazīʿ 77
- isnād*
 Abbasid 54, 67
 of Abū al-Ṣalt's testimony 97–98
 criticism of 122, 148
 use of 4, 6, 69, 75, 135, 150, 167
- istijābat al-daʿwa* 144
- Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (Imam) 30, 71, 78, 165
- Jāḥiẓ, al- 8–9, 25
 as critic of *ahl al-sunna* 38–39, 45, 46, 60, 68
 on Ibn Ḥanbal's trial 126–27, 131
- Jahmīs
 influence on al-Maʾmūn of 33, 53, 65, 151
 condemnation of 37–38, 56, 117, 148, 125, 151
- jihād* 59, 121, 139
- judges
 biographies of 15, 17
 and the *miḥna* 35–36, 39–40
 proto-Sunni view of 57, 114, 150
- Jumaḥī, al- 9–10, 11
- Junayd, al- 156, 157, 159–60
- jurisprudence, *see fiqh*
- jurisprudents, *see fuqahāʾ*
- Kalābādhi, al- 100, 160–61, 162
- kalām* 148
 Ibn Ḥanbal's objections to 121, 179
 al-Maʾmūn's use of 43, 60
 al-Riḍā's use of 73, 82
 Sunni use of 40n90, 111, 125, 148, 152
- Karābīsī, al- 150
- Karbalāʾ 70
- Kashshī, al- 78, 79, 83
- Kāẓim, *see* Mūsā al-Kāẓim
- Khālid al-Daryūsh 31
- Khālid al-Ḥaddād 139
- Khalīfa b. Khayyāt 7, 10
- Khalīl b. Aḥmad, al- 9
- khalq al-Qurʾān* 43–44, 47, 55, 118–19, 171
 Ibn Ḥanbal's objection to 118–19, 120, 121, 123, 125, 138, 150
 al-Maʾmūn's advocacy of 21, 33–40, 43, 63–64, 65–66, 86
 Sunni refutations of 133–35, 137, 148, 151–52
- Kharrāz, al- 156
- Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, al- 17, 19, 150

- as biographer of Bishr al-Hāfi 157, 168–69, 176–77, 178, 184
 as biographer of Ibn Ḥanbal 138, 146, 178
 as biographer of al-Ma'mūn 53–54, 56–58, 61, 68
 Khidr, al- 182
 Khudrī, Abū Sa'īd al- 59, 139
 Khurasan 25–28
 Khurasanis 36, 37, 132, 157
see also abnā'
 Khuwārizmī, al- 32
 Khuzā'i, Aḥmad b. Naṣr al- 34, 39
 Kulaynī, al- 90
kurh 124, 127
- Lessing, Gotthold 175
- Madā'inī, al- 6
maghāzī 2, 3, 4
 Mahdī, al- (caliph) 65
 Majlisī, al- 75
 Ma'mūn, al- (caliph) 14, 25–26, 67–69
 accession of 27–28
 and the *ahl al-sunna* 33–40, 43–48, 55, 59–60, 115, 151–53, 172
 pro-Alid policies of 28–32, 34, 37, 43, 53, 55, 91–93
 and Bishr al-Hāfi 155, 184, 187
 caliphate of 28–40
 death of 34, 51–52, 119, 144
 Ḥadīth-knowledge of 43, 53–61, 66, 67, 92
 in Ibn Bābawayh's *ʿUyūn* 91–100
 in Ibn al-ʿImrānī's *Inbā'* 62–64
 in Ibn Tāhir's *Kitāb Baghdād* 41–48, 53
 in Iṣfahānī's *Maqātil* 88–90
 as *malik* 41–43, 52
 in Mas'ūdī's *Murūj* 49–52, 53
 and the *miḥna* 33–40, 53, 63–64, 109–10, 118–19
 scientific interests of 32–33, 32n51, 43
 Shiite attitudes toward 31–32, 73–74, 75, 86–87, 88–90, 91–104
 in later Sunni sources 64–67, 137, 153, 184
 in Ṭabarī's annals 20–21, 53
 in Ṭabarī's *sīra* 48–49
 in the *Ta'rīkh Baghdād* 53–54, 56–58, 61
 in the *Ta'rīkh Dimashq* 53, 54, 59–60, 62
see also under Abū al-Ṣalt al-Harawī; ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib; Alids; *ʿamma*; *imām al-hudā*; *khalq al-Qurʾān*; al-Ridā; *zuhd*
- manāqib* 18
 Maṣṣūr, al- (caliph) 45, 49, 58
 Maṣṣūr b. ʿAmmār 149
maqṭal 18
 Marājil 27
ma'rifa 156, 159, 185
 Ma'rūf al-Karkhī 14, 149, 156, 162, 180, 183
 Marzubānī, al- 12–13
- Mas'ūdī, al- 28, 55, 59, 66, 90
 as biographer of al-Ma'mūn 20, 21–23, 41, 49–52, 53, 67, 68
mathālib 18
 Mawṣilī, Ishāq al- 9
mazālim 42, 44
miḥna
 events of 32–33, 109–10
 Ḥanbalī accounts of 117–25, 129–38
 reasons for 34–40
 later Sunni depiction of 53, 63–64, 65–67, 129–38, 184
 victims of 37, 43–44, 55, 63, 118, 119, 181
see also under Bishr al-Hāfi; Ibn Ḥanbal
- miracles 82n61, 133n121, 165
 of Bishr al-Hāfi 171
 of al-Kāzim 80–81
 of al-Ridā 81, 82–83, 89, 94–95, 97
 of Ibn Ḥanbal 133–34, 135–37, 141, 145–46, 152, 153
- Mu'āfa b. ʿImrān, al- 180
 Mu'āwiya 2, 39, 43, 46, 55, 70
 Mubarrad, al- 19
 Mudgha 175
mufawwiḍa 82–83
muhadditha 86–87
 Muhājirūn 24–25
 Muḥammad (Prophet) 12, 40, 77, 92, 112, 128, 145
 biographies of 2, 5, 6
 emulation of 114, 142–43
 heirs of (*see also under* caliphs; Ḥadīth-scholars; Imam; Sufis) 13–15, 160–61, 165
 political succession to 24–25, 70
 as source of *sunna* 47, 53, 107–08, 112, 142–43
zuhd of 114, 154
see also Companions; dream-visions; *maghāzī*; *sīra*; Successors
- Muḥammad al-ʿAbdī 21–23, 91
 Muḥammad b. Abī al-Ward 164
 Muḥammad b. Alī b. Ḥamza 72
 Muḥammad al-Bāqir (Imam) 71
 Muḥammad b. Ja'far 73
 Muḥammad b. Nūḥ 119
 Muḥammad al-Qā'im (Imam) 72–73
 Muḥammad al-Taḳī (Imam) 79, 94
 Muḥāsibī, al- 162, 179
 Mukhāriq 99
 Mukhkha 155, 165, 175–78, 180
muraqqa' 159, 161
 Murji'a 33, 86, 145
 Mūsā al-Kāzim (Imam) 30, 71, 77, 79n45, 84, 86, 91–92, 99
 death of 73, 79, 80, 90, 95–96
 and Sufis 100

- mushabbih* 36, 38, 40
 see also tashbih
 musicians 8–9
 see also singers
musnad 4
 Mustadīf, al- (caliph) 62
 Mustanjid, al- (caliph) 62
 Mustarshid, al- (caliph) 61–62
 Mu'taṣim, al- (caliph) 34, 39, 63, 110, 119,
 137–38, 152–53
 at Ibn Ḥanbal's trial 120–24, 126, 131, 132,
 133, 134–35
 Mutawakkil, al- (caliph) 34, 55, 61, 110, 139,
 181
 Mu'tazila 45, 63, 123, 126, 152, 170
 and al-Ma'mūn 33, 34
 mysticism 14, 155, 159–60, 162, 186–87
 see also Sufis
- nābita* 36, 39
 Najāshī, al- 85, 86
nās 47, 111, 130
nasab, *see* genealogy
 Nawbakhtī, al- 86
 Nūrī, al- 156
- physicians 15–16
 poets 1, 6, 9–11, 17, 53–54
 proto-Sunnis, *see ahl al-sunna*
- Qāhir, al- (caliph) 21–23
 Qāsim b. Salām, al- 53
 Qawārīrī, al- 119, 124–25
qiyās 36, 108, 151
 Qummī, Sa'd b. 'Abd Allāh al- 86
 see also Ibn Bābawayh
 Qur'an 10, 12, 15, 45, 70, 77
 as basis for *fiqh* 108, 121, 122, 123, 125,
 126
 createdness of, *see khalq al-Qur'an*
 Qur'an-readers 1, 3, 14, 15, 17, 167
 criticism of 161, 163, 171
 Quraysh 6, 19, 24–25, 27
 Qushayrī, al- 172, 174
quṣṣās 107
- Rābi'a al-'Adawīya 172
 Rādī, al- (caliph) 51
 Rajā' b. al-Ḍaḥḥāk 84
 Rashīd, al- (caliph) 45, 53, 58, 65, 96, 150
 and al-Kāzīm 73, 80, 91–92, 98
 succession to 20, 26–27, 49, 50
 tomb of 31, 75, 89, 92
 Rāshidūn 60
ra'y 36, 108, 121, 179
 Rayḥāna 112
 Reiske, Johann 175
ri'āsa 33, 115, 122, 140
- Riḍā, 'Alī b. Mūsā al- (Imam) 21, 73–74,
 104–06, 144
 al-Ma'mūn's designation of 28–31, 34, 50,
 51, 73–74, 84, 88–104
 death of 31–32, 51, 74, 83, 88–90, 93–98,
 193–96
 heir apparenacy of 31, 73–74, 84–85, 86–87
 in Ibn Bābawayh's *Uyun* 76–84, 90–98
 as Imam 30, 73, 76–84, 86
 in Iṣfahānī's *Maqātil* 88–90
 shrine of 74–75
 sources on 72–73, 85, 88n90
 and Sufis 99–100
 Sunni views of 53, 63, 65–66, 76
 see also under Abū al-Ṣalt al-Harawī;
 miracles
riḍā min āl Muḥammad, al- 25, 29–30
 "Risālat al-khamīs" 27, 29, 33, 41, 51, 53, 60
rijāl 7–8, 158, 160, 168, 170, 185
ru'yā 40
- Ṣafadī, al- 17, 18
 Sahl b. Salāma 31, 38, 39, 45, 46
 capitulation of 32, 38, 45, 60, 68, 152
 saints, *see abdāl*; *awliyā'*
 Sajjāda 119, 124–25
 Ṣāliḥ b. Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal 109, 112–14, 140,
 143, 148
 as biographer of Ibn Ḥanbal 112–15,
 75–123, 124–26, 129, 136
 Sam'ānī, al- 173
 Saqīfa 24–25, 70
 Sarī al-Saqaṭī 156, 159, 163, 167
 Sarraj, Abū Naṣr al- 14, 15, 160, 161–62, 175,
 185
 Seljuks 61
 Shāfi'ī, al- 4, 14, 36, 108, 149–51
 Shāfi'īs 111, 149–50
 Shaqīq al-Balkhī 100, 156
 Sha'rānī, al- 170
 Shiites 31, 49, 65, 74, 75, 86
 doctrines of 34, 70–72, 72–73
 and Sufis 99–100
 see also Imamis; Twelvers; Zaydis
 Shu'ayb 122
 Shu'ba b. al-Hajjāj 4
shubha 112–13
 Sībawayh 13
ṣiddīq 161, 182
sifla, *see 'amma*
ṣinḥ 14, 16, 160
 singers 1, 7
 see also musicians
sīra
 of the Prophet 2, 4, 6, 112
 as generic term 18, 111
 of the caliphs 20
 of al-Ma'mūn 21–23, 48

- Subkī, Tāj al-Dīn al- 18, 65, 137–38, 170
 Successors (of the Companions) 3, 6, 128
 Sufis 15, 50, 59, 156, 174–75
 as heirs of the Prophet 160–61, 162, 165
 biographical practice of 162–84, 186–87
 emergence of 158–61, 162–63
 and Ḥadīth-scholars 169–70, 185
 and Ḥanbalīs 111, 146–48, 153, 179–80
 and the origins of biography 14, 160
 and Shiites 99–100
 see also zuhhād
 Sufyān al-Thawrī 158, 180
 Sufyānī, al- 37, 38
 Sulamī, al- 100, 162–65, 180, 185
 Sulaymān b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Sizjī 134–36
 Sulaymān b. Ḥarb 56–57
 Ṣulī, Abū Bakr al- 51, 85
sunna 45, 77, 107–09, 153, 176
 attitudes toward 33, 34–35, 56, 157, 165
 citation of 53, 57, 121
 knowledge of 7, 58, 60, 141, 160
 used in slogans 45, 61, 110, 122
 among Ḥanbalīs 112–17, 185
 see also Ḥadīth
 Sunnis, 32, 54–67, 70, 75, 86, 111, 151, 185
 see also ahl al-sunna
sūqa, al- 44
 Suyūfī, al- 15, 19, 65–66, 150

ṭabaqa 16
ṭabaqāt (genre) 9, 10–11, 18
 Ṭabarī, al- 45, 53, 61, 70, 74, 94, 96
 an annalist 20–21, 49, 51
 as biographer of al-Ma’mūn 41, 48–49, 52,
 53, 55, 67
 account of *miḥna* by 118–19
 Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn 21, 28, 41, 142n51
tafwīd, *see mufawwiḍa*
taḥqīq 156, 167
tā’ifa 13–18, 98–100, 161, 178, 182–84
 of caliphs 19–20, 62, 67, 98–99
 of Ḥadīth-scholars 158, 186
 of Imams 98–99
 of Sufis 156, 159, 160, 162, 164, 167, 175,
 185–86
taḥlīm 40
 Tamīm b. ‘Abd Allāh 98
taqīya 126–27, 131
tarājīm 18
ta’rīkh 7, 18, 18–23
tashbīh 33, 38, 40, 45, 60, 125
 see also mushabbihā
tasmiya 3, 14
tawakkul 161–62
ta’wīl 59, 120, 121, 176
 Ṭayālīsī, al- 145
 Tha’lab 19
 Thumāma b. Ashras 47, 56

 Ṭusī, Shaykh al-Ṭā’ifa al- 86
 Twelvers 53, 66, 74
 beliefs of 70, 72–73, 77, 90, 100
 biographical practice of 75–76, 87, 91–100
 internal criticism among 101–04

udabā’ 17
 see also adab
‘udūl 33, 39
‘ulamā’ 3, 16, 17, 160, 167
 criticism of 161, 163
 and the *miḥna* 34, 120, 137
 see also ahl al-sunna; fuqahā’; Ḥadīth-
 scholars; *‘ilm*
 ‘Ujayf b. ‘Anbasa 123
 ‘Umar b. Ḥabīb 57–58
 ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb 24–25, 33, 53, 86, 124
 invoked by *zuhhād* 44, 47
 Umayyads 25–26, 36, 49, 62, 70
 ‘Uthmān (caliph) 33, 38, 46, 86

walī, *see awliyā’*; *wilāya*
 Wāqidi, al- 3–4, 5–6
wāqifa 73, 78–81, 79n43, 84, 96
wara’ 112–14, 116–17, 143, 154, 177
 Wāṣil b. ‘Aṭā 46
 Wāthiq, al- (caliph) 34, 39, 110, 137, 181
wilāya 87, 142, 144, 149, 153, 185
 women, *see* ‘Āisha; Fātima; Ghadr;
 Mukhkha; Zubayda

 Yaghmurī, al- 12
 Yahyā b. Aktham 46–47, 50–51, 53, 5–56,
 151, 184
 Yahyā b. Ma’īn 4, 5, 14, 118
 Ya’qūbī, al- 20, 45, 90, 91, 94, 127–28, 133
 Yaḳūt al-Ḥamawī 15, 17
 Yāsir al-Khādīm 94
 Yazīd b. Hārūn 33n53

 Zaydīs 58, 68, 72, 87
 Ziyād b. Abīhi 12
 Zubayda 27, 49, 51, 66
 Zubda 175
zuhd 114–15, 143, 147, 154, 173
 see also zuhhād; and under Bishr al-Ḥafī;
 Ibn Ḥanbal
zuhhād
 biographies of 14, 17
 as *awliyā’* 153
 as critics of rulers 45–46, 59, 139, 152
 as critics of al-Ma’mūn 44–45, 46, 50–51,
 58–61, 68, 99–100
 and Ḥadīth 155, 162, 163–64, 185
 and Ḥanbalīs 114–15, 144, 152, 155,
 168–70, 185–87
 and Sufis 156, 159–60
 Zuhri, Muḥammad b. Muslim al- 4, 5

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